

A MAGE
IN THE
MAKING

The Chronicles of
Grimm Dragonblaster Book 1

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A mage in the making

Prologue

Humankind's long flirtation with Technology began with the first crude stone tools and ended with the fusion flames of the Final War. The war lasted five days. At the end of this time, no ruler, government or nation remained to declare itself the victor. Plutonium mushrooms hung over Earth's once-proud cities of steel and glass, turning them into radioactive charnel houses. Hundreds of millions suffered and died in the radioactive ruins, cursing the technocrats who had brought them to the gates of Paradise, only to deny them entrance.

Humanity had overseen the demise of the dodo, the passenger pigeon, the thylacine wolf and many other species. It now faced extinction at the hands of its primary survival attribute: intelligence.

Under the black, awful clouds that coalesced to form a funeral pall over the proud dreams and hopes of mankind, the flame of the human race guttered fitfully, on the brink of final, irrevocable extinction.

Nonetheless, the indomitable human will to survive made many of those remaining on the face of the radiation-scorched planet struggle to rebuild some remnant of civilisation in the wilderness, where the depredation and tribulation wrought by the thermonuclear weapons was less than in the ruined cities. The first townships were little more than loose collections of shanties where people banded together to scour the radioactive ruins for tinned food, bottled water, clothes or whatever else they could find that might prove to be of some use in their shared fight for survival.

The scourge of radioactive decay lingered, and, for generations, sports and stillbirths were common, and even the victors of the initial struggle for survival hovered on the brink of oblivion. It was then that evolution, held at bay for so long by the protective cocoon of civilisation, began once more to shape the future of humankind.

At first, there were a few who, whilst outwardly normal, began to manifest strange abilities in their extreme youth, such as the ability to set fire to objects, or to levitate themselves above the ground. Many of these gifted individuals were killed as abominations and affronts to nature in the more puritanically fundamentalist communes. The forces of natural selection, aided by human rejection, played endless games

of chance, using the lives of hapless sports and mutants as playing tokens. Most of these sports were sacrificed on the altars of new religious fundamentalism.

However, as more useful talents came to light, such as the ability to divine water in the desert, to see and delineate areas of high radiation and to cause the clouds to part or the rain to fall, these mutants became ever more highly prized and their practitioners were accorded high status, as religious strictures were thrown aside.

The most successful magic-users were protected from the harsh working conditions of the fields and were protected by their communities, although still shunned by the genetically "normal". Thus those with the gift survived and thrived, their genes protected and strengthened by breeding with other gifted people who were their only real friends.

As the townships grew in affluence and wealth and magic became more accepted, the first guilds of magic sprang up to seek out and to foster the powers and sleights that might reside within the populace. Education and prosperity began to flower anew, and the spate of deformed children and stillbirths steadily decreased as the remaining breeding stock of humanity was slowly and painfully whittled down to the most hardy and resourceful individuals. Magic never became commonplace, but it became a valuable resource in the pursuit of the rebirth of Civilisation. Technology was but a dim memory, but it remained a source of hatred; a phantom with which to frighten fractious children.

Trade began between the townships as radioactive half-lives ticked away and the land became better able to support the growing of crops and the raising of healthy livestock. Barter gave way to letters of credit, followed by the exchange of metal and paper currency.

Five hundred years after those few days of thermonuclear insanity, the widely-separated townships were burgeoning centres of trade ringing the pockets of intense radiation that had been the old cities. The most important cities established the first schools of magic, training magically-gifted youngsters of both sexes. In time, two main classes of magic emerged: the male art of Thaumaturgy, whose acolytes derived power from within themselves; and its feminine equivalent, Geomancy, whose devotees obtained their magic from within the life-forces of Earth itself, including physical love.

Most witches went about their lives in a harmonious way, applying their Geomantic powers to cure sickness and to mend damaged items; most of the new cities welcomed powerful witches.

The early mages used their budding Thaumaturgical skills in a mechanistic manner to lift heavy loads and to deter crime, and, in many cases, they lived alongside their female counterparts in a harmonious and friendly working relationship. Romances between mages and witches were not only tolerated but encouraged; the child of a witch and a mage was likely to be more powerful and skilled than either of his or her parents.

Generation by generation, the dispassionate power of Natural Selection amplified the traits of magic and the differences between the two complementary disciplines.

The truce between the devotees of Geomancy and the adepts of Thaumaturgy did not last. The death knell of the old concord sounded as the mages began to band together into what would become the Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges, guarding the secrets of their art with jealous zeal. The witches responded by forming the Geomantic Sisterhood, which the mages saw as a threat to their growing power.

The new battle of the sexes ended when the Guild introduced strict rules of celibacy, denying the members of the Sisterhood their greatest advantage over their male rivals for power. Although most witches gained great reserves of magical strength through intimate physical contact with men, they did not seek to use it as a weapon against their male-friends; nonetheless, the masters of the Guild saw sexual contact as a threat, and they acted accordantly, instituting strict rules of celibacy for all mages under their control.

Denied direct influence over the mages, the witches' might waned, and the patriarchal cities began to marginalise the witches, giving preference to the establishment of Guild Houses, who were governed by a single authority: High Lodge. While the Houses undertook the training of promising boys who showed the signs of Thaumaturgical power, High Lodge stood aloof, confining its role to the determination of Guild policy and the settlement of disputes between the rival Houses.

The Sisterhood faded and died, leaving its former members to scratch out meagre livings as best they could, while the Guild went from strength to strength. In time, the reasons for the strict rules regarding celibacy and Technology were forgotten, although the laws themselves remained as articles of faith.

After the passage of eight millennia, the Guild became complacent; confident in its pre-eminence, putting its trust in its ancient laws and strictures. Protected by law in many townships and

cities, its leaders became self-satisfied and vulnerable, since no single organisation remained to oppose it.

While most witches accepted their imposed lower status, many did not. Many peaceful demands for the recognition of witches were crushed by brutal force from the towns' fathers, until only the very bravest women would dare complain about their lot. The majority of the enfeebled witches had little choice but to accept the few, stale crumbs their male masters threw them, deprived as they were of their greatest power. A thousand years after its formation, the Guild basked in its pomp and pride. Since no enemies remained to threaten its supremacy, it became bloated and lethargic, a shadow of its former self.

Hidden in a remote nunnery, a single witch watched and waited; plotting the downfall of her hated male rivals and the resurgence of the Geomantic cause. With the strange, awful new power she had discovered, she had influenced Guild politics more than once, and she sought the final, irrevocable push that would topple the Lords of the Guild from their lofty pedestals.

In a small, run-down smithy in a drab hamlet, an old man, burdened with years of guilt and self-loathing, put down his quill and placed a folded letter into a waxed pouch. The grizzled smith reached into his shirt pocket and extracted an ornate blue and gold ring, staring at it for a few moments. Then, he kissed the ring and dropped it into the pouch, sighing as he sealed the package.

"You will understand when you are older, Grimm," he muttered under his breath. "May the Names bless you and... forgive me."

Chapter 1: A Bedraggled Boy

With a grateful sigh, Doorkeeper lowered himself into his comfortable, battered leather armchair. He asked little of life, and he preferred tranquil solitude to vigorous debate or studious book-learning. The cheerful fire, whispering and crackling in the grate, and the sonorous tick of the pendulum clock opposite him, soothed the old man's jangled nerves.

The distant, muffled sounds of atrocious weather, kept at bay by the mighty walls of the ancient fortress of Arnor House, served to increase his feeling of well-being, and the old man poured himself a glass of wine from a bottle on the small table beside him. Doorkeeper held up his glass and admired the ruby liquid, seemingly brought to life by the flickering of the fire's flames. He drew in a mouthful of the beverage, rolling it around his palate and savouring the wine before swallowing. He put the glass back on the table and contemplated.

Tick, tock, tick, tock...

Doorkeeper was at peace, comforted by the knowledge that the House was safe within its thick stone walls and sustained by its immutable, ages-old rituals and customs. The effects of a heavy meal and the comfortable, familiar surroundings dulled the old man's senses, and he settled back in his chair with another sigh of deep contentment.

Tomorrow night would not be so tranquil, Doorkeeper reflected, since he would be required to act as Master of Ceremonies at a gathering of mages, representatives of High Lodge among them. Such meetings were always well attended and often noisy. The old man knew there would be demonstrations of magic, sometimes destructive, once the wine had started to flow, as the various mages bragged of their powers, each trying to outdo his peers and prove himself the most powerful mage.

Doorkeeper disliked these drunken revels, since they interrupted his precious routine; as Master of Ceremonies, it was his duty to keep the guests cheerful and well-supplied with food and drink, and he frowned upon the disruption of proper pomp and protocol by what he considered foolish tricks. The aged major-domo liked to tell himself that such childish pranks were beneath him; the truth was that even the very simplest of these 'foolish tricks' was beyond his meagre magical capabilities.

His proper title was Mage Doorkeeper, although, to his endless disappointment, nobody ever seemed to remember the honorific. Despite the fact that he wore a Guild ring and carried a mage staff, he was not a potent master of the arcane arts. For this reason, the old

mage tended to dislike talented Specialists from other, richer Houses: men with fine silk robes and bulging purses, who boasted of travels to exotic lands Doorkeeper would never see. He revered the senior mages of his own House, but he tended to disparage the skills of those whom he considered as mere 'Outsiders.' Nonetheless, he was always careful to keep a respectful distance from them.

Doorkeeper had essayed a number of Specialities such as Reader, Healer, Scholar, and Seer, proving quite unsuited to all of them. At the age of fifty, as the oldest Neophyte in the House, he had despaired of ever finding a true magical vocation. It was with great relief that he had accepted lifetime tenure as Mage Doorkeeper of Arnor House, overjoyed to have found an accepted Speciality at last. This also pleased the authorities of the House, since there had been no permanent incumbent in the post for many years. Although the post of Mage Doorkeeper was a symbolic position with few real responsibilities or privileges, any House that could afford to employ one seemed to enjoy a certain cachet within the Guild.

Tick, tock, tick, tock...

The old man had been addressed as 'Doorkeeper' for so long now that he could barely remember the name he had borne before being granted the title. He dressed in fading midnight blue robes decorated with embroidered silver runes, and he bore a handsome head of curly white hair and a long white beard. Image was important to Doorkeeper, and he tried hard to cultivate the air of a master of the arcane arts, but his bulbous, red nose and round, ruddy face ruined the impression he sought to create.

Despite his yearning to be recognised as a venerable magic-user, he knew he gave the impression of a genial, bumbling and slightly senile grandfather, and he announced his presence wherever he went by a chorus of creaking, popping joints. Doorkeeper's habits included rubbing his nose, sudden fits of furious scratching under his robes and muttering to himself, all of which detracted severely from the stern, sorcerous image he tried to display to his peers. However, although the old man was dimly aware of these little tics and foibles, he found himself quite unable to suppress them.

There was a common saying within the Guild, power and presence complete the mage, and the old man knew he had little of either, to his continual chagrin. One of the outward signs of a Guild magic-user's 'presence', apart from his staff and his Guild ring, was 'Mage Speech'. This was a formal, rigid manner of delivery, without contractions and heavy on polysyllabic verbiage, intended to raise an invisible barrier around the speaking mage, so as to maintain an air of aloofness that demanded respect. From an early age, the Magemasters in the Scholasticate hammered into each House Student the need to

adopt this mode of speech when on official House business and when dealing with Seculars such as tradesmen, but Doorkeeper never seemed to have found the knack. Despite his best efforts, he always ended up repeating himself, stammering, or lapsing into vernacular speech.

The ancient mage had few formal duties, but he regarded each of his obligations as essential for the smooth running of the House. Among these was the responsibility to be on hand to welcome any mage returning home after leave of absence, and Doorkeeper regarded this responsibility as paramount.

The heavy, black oak door that led to the Great Hall had neither handle nor lock, but it swung open at the merest touch of anyone bearing a Guild ring. Whenever a member of the House approached the portal, a soft chime sounded in Doorkeeper's chamber, enabling him always to be ready to greet a returning member of what he regarded as his true family.

Tick, tock, tick, tock...

Doorkeeper felt his eyelids growing heavy. He gave a deep yawn and stretched luxuriantly, to the almost musical accompaniment of protesting joints.

Nobody's going to be travelling tonight in this weather, thought the major-domo. Best I have an early night, so I can be ready for tomorrow.

Opening his mouth in another cavernous yawn, he forced himself to his feet, stretched again, picked up his glass and downed the remainder of its contents at a gulp. As he walked over to damp down the fire, he heard the gentle musical tones signalling the arrival of a House mage.

Who in the world can that be? he wondered. Oh, well, duty calls, I suppose.

"You'd think a few more people round here would appreciate my efforts on behalf of the House. Work, work, work; that's all I ever seem to do," he muttered in a peevish tone. Grumbling under his breath, he gathered his voluminous robes around him, belched and rushed to the main hall to discharge his ceremonial duty.

The small boy felt enormous relief and a sense of victory as he reached the huge portal. His brown, homespun robes were soaked and mud-spattered, clinging to his thin legs and body like some avaricious

octopus unsure of where to begin devouring him. His long, dark hair hung in a dripping mess across his face. His legs were sore; indeed, his whole body ached after the long trek up the winding mountain pass, a journey that had appeared much less onerous at its outset than it had proved to be. The black fortress was far larger than he would have believed and, therefore, at a much greater distance than he had thought.

Two hours of being lashed by needle-like rain, being whipped by unseen barbed branches and being flayed by a frigid, howling wind had sapped much of his strength. By the time he reached the door of the monstrous edifice at last, he was fighting the temptation to turn tail and flee back to the warmth, security and comfortable familiarity of the forge that had been his home for all of his short life. As he craned his neck, taking in the vastness of the fortress, he gulped, realising that there could be no turning back now.

Although it seemed unlikely to him that anyone inside the fortress would hear any sound he might make, the boy raised his fist to pound on the black oak portal. He felt a shock of surprise as the door swung open before his hand made contact. His astonishment at this fortunate occurrence was exceeded only by his relief at the prospect of shelter from the vicious tempest. He staggered inside with gratitude, and the door swung smoothly back into place with a decisive thump, cutting off most of the clamour of the storm. Despite his exhaustion, the drenched and exhausted child gazed in wonder at his surroundings. Warm, orange light illuminated a vast entrance hall paved with hexagonal slabs of blue and gold. High above him, the boy could see a deep blue vaulted roof studded with star-like, silver points. Soft, almost inaudible music drifted through the hall and he could see a seven-foot high obsidian pyramid, exuding a gentle blue glow. Entranced by his opulent, fabulous surroundings, several minutes passed before the lad became aware of a tall, blue-robed man staring at him, at first sight the very image of a mighty wizard.

Remembering his manners, he managed a courteous, if awkward bow.

The tall man regarded the waterlogged apparition with curiosity. "Which mage opened the door for you, child?" he said, his voice tinged with mixed concern and puzzlement.

The waif, who looked to be about seven or eight years of age,

wore a nervous and yet earnest expression, as if he might have been wrongly suspected of some prank. His chattering teeth all but robbed him of the power of speech, but Doorkeeper was impressed that the child persevered at delivering his answer; this was no lily-livered milksop.

"N-n-nobody, s-sir, I p-promise. I n-knocked at the d-door, but it opened all by its-s-self. Are you the Ch-ch-chief W-wizard?"

Doorkeeper shook his head, and studied the dripping, shivering child. Explanations could wait; it was plain the boy intended no mischief, and he was clearly in need of food and warmth.

The old man tried to adopt a grave, sorcerous tone. "I am the Mage Doorkeeper. You may call me Doorkeeper. Ordinarily, I would advise you to go back down the mountain and seek food and shelter in the town, but I wouldn't leave a dog out in a night like this, let alone a small child like you. A horrible night it is, dear me, yes, a horrible night."

Doorkeeper felt a pang of frustration, as he realised his babbling tongue had betrayed him again, robbing his speech of the grave solemnity he had been trying to project. At least the child did not seem to have noticed his lapse, and so the old mage continued.

"Come with me, lad, and I'll try to find you some food and a bed for the night. We can talk about how you came here in the morning."

"Sir... Doorkeeper, I'm here to learn how to be a wizard. I have a letter for the Chief Wizard from my Granfer, see." The boy held out a wet, sealed package, clutched in a grubby fist.

Doorkeeper felt a little annoyed that the boy, although polite, did not seem cowed in the least by the mage's mighty presence. However, the major-domo took the damp parcel, with some distaste at the slimy feel of its clammy, waxed surface. He was about to slide it into his pocket when he felt a lump in the parcel and a slight, distinctive tingle up his arm. He realised now how the boy had managed to open the door; inside the bundle must be a genuine House ring. He examined the package with more care, and noted the fluent, educated script on its surface:

'Lord Thorn Virias, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, called the Iron-willed, Honoured Prelate and Acclaimed Master, Arnor House of the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges.'

The old mage knew that no mere Secular would be likely to know the Lord Prelate's full, official title, and he looked with new interest at the child. Despite the boy's wretched appearance, his dark, intense eyes seemed to burn with an inner strength that reminded Doorkeeper of someone he had known long ago.

"What's... what is your name, boy?"

"Grimm Afelnor, Doorkeeper."

The name of Afelnor was somehow familiar to Doorkeeper, echoing and resonating in his head, although he could not quite remember its significance.

The old man furrowed his brow. "Was your father a mage here, Grimm?"

"No, sir, he was a blacksmith, but I don't really remember him. He and my mamma died when I was little. Granfer Loras looks after me now. He's a smith, too."

Sudden realisation flooded into Doorkeeper's mind: Loras Afelnor, the Oath-breaker!

Once the brightest star in the House firmament, Loras had fallen from grace some forty years before, and he had been stripped of all magic before being banished from the Guild. Now, Doorkeeper knew how the child had come by the ring.

Whilst he harboured the gravest doubts that Lord Thorn would accept the grandson of the Traitor as a Student, Doorkeeper still felt some kinship for his disgraced former Guildbrother, and he remembered the dignity with which Loras had submitted to the humbling and agonising ordeal that marked his expulsion from the Guild.

"Grimm, I promise I will take your grandfather's message to Lord Thorn as soon as I can, tomorrow morning. Tonight, you must eat and rest; I will accept no more argument on the matter."

For once in his life, Doorkeeper sounded as grave and serious as he had so often yearned to be; if the lad had a tenth of the power of his grandfather, a long and arduous road might lie ahead of him, and the grizzled mage felt sorry for the bedraggled boy.

Loras had been a Mage Questor, the most powerful and valuable class of Specialist, and Doorkeeper knew the making of a Questor was a turbulent and torturous affair. If there was any chance that Grimm might be subjected to the Questor Ordeal, as his grandfather had been, this intelligent, earnest child might be turned into a neurotic paranoid or worse, and the old man felt a frisson of distress at that gruesome prospect. However, Doorkeeper regarded Lord Thorn with nothing less than absolute trust, and he accepted that, sometimes, difficult choices had to be made for the good of the House.

Even if regrettable mistakes might be made on occasion.

Chapter 2: Revelations

"I am ever so hungry, Sir Doorkeeper, but you couldn't take Granfer's letter to the Chief Wizard now, could you?" Grimm seemed near the end of his reserves but still determined, disturbingly so for one so young.

Doorkeeper cried, "Now, Grimm, not another word! Not another word, I say! You're nearly dead on your feet, my boy. I absolutely insist that you let me take you to the scullery for some food and warmth. Lord Thorn would be very angry with me if I disturbed him at this time of night-you wouldn't want that, would you? The Prelate usually goes to bed early and is up with the sun."

Doorkeeper sneezed suddenly, scratched his nose and muttered unintelligibly for a few moments.

"I understand, Sir... Doorkeeper," said the boy, his eyes wide. "I wouldn't want the Chief... the Prelate to be angry with you."

Grimm had to admit, even to himself, that the enticing prospects of a warm fire and food had begun to drive all other thoughts from his mind. He had tried, after all, and Doorkeeper seemed such a nice old man.

He took Doorkeeper's proffered hand as the old mage led him out of the sumptuous entrance hall. A rabbit-warren of passages led off from the vestibule, and Grimm felt quite disorientated by the time the pair reached the warm sanctuary of what the old man had called 'the scullery'. A large fire crackled cheerfully at its centre, the gentle, welcome heat suffusing through Grimm's chilled body. A profusion of pots, pans and utensils hung on the walls, and a delicious aroma of cooked meat filled the room. Doorkeeper motioned Grimm towards a threadbare but comfortable chair, and the boy gratefully sank into its creaking, leathern embrace.

Doorkeeper excused himself and returned a few minutes later with a plate piled high with food, which the child attacked with gusto. "So how did you travel here, young Grimm, especially on such a foul, horrible night? This place is far from the beaten tracks. Oh yes, very far, a long way indeed, yes."

Grimm swallowed meat pie forcefully; he had been brought up not to talk with a full mouth. "I was sent by my Granfer Loras to be a

wizard. Harvel, who works for Granfer, brought me to the bottom of the mountain, but he couldn't get the cart any further up the road. He really wanted to come with me, but the weather then was nice, and the castle was a lot nearer than it really was-I mean, it looked nearer, because it's so big."

"Ah, yes, it is a very large building, and the path is full of lots of tortuous twists," said Doorkeeper, and the serious expression came back across his face.

"Your family name is Afelnor?" Grimm nodded. "And your grandfather's name is Loras? Loras the mage?"

Grimm giggled. "You're teasing me, Doorkeeper! He's not a wizard-he's only a blacksmith. Harvel does most of the work now, because Granfer is getting really old and he creaks when he moves, just like you." Remembering his manners, Grimm swiftly added, "I didn't mean to be rude, Sir Doorkeeper."

Doorkeeper waved a hand dismissively. "I'm sure you meant no insult, Grimm. I am old, as old as the hills, yes, indeed. Are you sure your grandfather has never been anything other than a smith? Can you be sure he was never, ever a mage... even a long time ago?"

Grimm laughed at the thought of his bear-like grandfather in the fine, silken robes of a wizard instead of his habitual dungarees and stained leather forge apron. "He's a very good smith; everybody in the village likes him... except for old Mister Drule, the shepherd, but Granfer says he doesn't even like his own shadow. He's quite a nasty man really; Mister Drule, I mean."

So, the august and mighty Loras Afelnor, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, once called the Firelord but more recently known to the House as the Oath-breaker, is now plain Loras, the smith, Doorkeeper mused.

He had heard nothing of Loras Firelord since the Questor's expulsion from the Guild, four decades before, and had assumed he was dead. However, it was quite believable that Loras had gone to ground in this way. Doorkeeper knew the Questor had been the son of a smith, and he had always been reserved, as was expected of a Guild Mage. Also, instead of conforming to the common stereotype of a tall, willow-thin sorcerer, Loras had been of middling height, but stocky, and as strong as a bear. Yes, it all made sense.

Still, Doorkeeper had a moment's amusement at the mental image of the stern, confident Mage Questor as a begrimed, sweaty figure with a straw hat, calmly discussing the shoeing of a farmer's horse in the round, wordy tones of a Guild Mage. There was no malice in Doorkeeper's daydream, for he had liked Afelnor well, but the concept still amused him.

The ancient mage wondered if he should tell the boy the full and

unpleasant truth about Loras' downfall, but he had always doted on solemn children although, or perhaps because, he had none himself. Deciding to sugar the pill as much as possible, he turned to Grimm.

"I don't mean to be unkind, Grimm," he said, "but you shouldn't let your hopes rise too high. About being taken in as a Student, I mean. The name of Loras Afelnor is known here, but I am afraid that many people here don't remember him too kindly. Lord Thorn receives a lot of applications for charity places here at the Guild, a very great number indeed, but most of them are rejected outright. Lord Thorn might just reject your application because of your name. He was a good friend to your grandfather Loras, a very good friend, but I think he was very upset by Loras' actions."

Grimm's eyes were wide and wondering, with nascent tears glittering around them. "What could my Granfer have done to make the Chief Wizard angry? He's a kind man; everyone back home in Aylmer likes him. He is ever so nice, really."

The boy's brow furrowed, as if he were searching Doorkeeper's words for some inner meaning; then, his expression cleared. "You mean they might send me back to the smithy? I'd like that. I only came here because Granfer wanted it so much. I can't see how I could be a wizard, even if Granfer wants me to. But I'd try hard, just for him, like I did in the smithy." His face fell a little. "I wasn't very good in the smithy, so Granfer didn't think I'd make a very good smith. I do so want to be really good at something for Granfer if I can."

"Doorkeeper, what did he do? I really want to know, even if it's not very nice. If I'm going to be here a really long time, perhaps I ought to know."

Doorkeeper hesitated. It seemed unlikely to him that Lord Thorn would accept any application from Loras the Traitor but, if he did, the boy would indeed be within the House for a long time. His future classmates might have an unfair disadvantage over him, and Doorkeeper might not be able to rectify the situation before Grimm was badly hurt; the major-domo knew how cruel lads could be to each other. Better to tell the boy now, as kindly as he could. Grimm could be no more than seven years of age, and the major-domo knew that the full, unvarnished truth might upset him deeply. He knew that he must tell the child something, so he picked his words with care.

"Grimm, what I have to tell you is what I know and nothing else. A long time ago, a very long time ago, before I became a mage, I knew your grandfather. He was twenty-seven years old, and he was very kind to me. Twenty-seven may seem very old to you, but it's very young for a Guild Mage. It seemed like nearly all the others were nasty to me because my parents didn't have a lot of money. Nearly all of them seemed to be rich, or nasty, or both. I was very unhappy, but

your grandfather, Loras, wasn't like the others. He was much younger than me, but he really was a proper mage, one of the kind we call a Questor. He was one of the best mages in the whole house, except maybe for Lord Thorn.

"He was rich, too; not because he'd been given the money, but because he'd earned it in his Quests... they're like errands that Questors do for the Lord Prelate. He was asked to go on a lot of Quests because he was such a good mage.

"I was very depressed because I'd tried a lot of different types of magic and still hadn't found the right one. Loras gave me a long talk about how awful it had been for him when he was learning to be a mage, and how he often wished he was back in his father's smithy.

"He made me talk about my family, although I didn't want to. I didn't have a happy childhood, and I didn't like my parents for sending me here. If I'd been from a really poor family, I'm sure they wouldn't have put up with me here for long, because I wasn't a very good Student. My parents had just enough money to send me here, and I felt like they'd locked me away from the world rather than have me around. I hated them and almost everybody else. Loras made me see just how wrong I was. He even visited my parents to see how they were coping, and I think he gave them some money.

"Nearly everybody liked Loras Afelnor. He did get a lot of trouble and teasing from the richer boys at first, because he was a country boy, and they weren't very kind to him. Still, he was a good Student, by far the best of his age group, and nobody was too surprised when he became a Questor."

With this last sentence, Doorkeeper had glossed over several important details. He knew little of what the Magemasters did to turn a Student into a Mage Questor, but he knew it was very different to what was done to most of the House Scholasticate's inmates. Loras had become reclusive and neurotic, starting at shadows, his eyes hooded and haunted. For many months, Doorkeeper had seen little of the youth, but he had seen with his own eyes the result of Afelnor's training: a wrecked schoolroom; four Students and a Magemaster in the Infirmary with grievous injuries; and, many months later, Loras' Acclamation as a Mage Questor.

"Loras Afelnor was declared a wizard, or as we would say 'Acclaimed as a mage', and he soon became a very important one," Doorkeeper continued. "He was asked to visit High Lodge, the most important place in the whole Guild, several times, and he got to be very rich.

"Lord Thorn was his best friend, another strong Questor, and we all assumed that, one day, either Loras or Thorn would become Prelate here or be asked to join High Lodge. Then Lord Thorn caught Loras-

doing something bad."

Grimm balled his small fists and frowned. "Granfer isn't a bad man! He wouldn't do anything wrong!"

Doorkeeper gulped, a little out of his depth. "I'm sure Loras didn't mean it to be bad, Grimm," he stammered. "It wasn't like stealing or anything, but it was bad anyway. All I will say is that I think he was trying to ease an old man's pain, but other people didn't see it like that.

"Nearly all of the House council, what we call the Presidium, wanted Loras to be executed for what he had done, but his good friend Thorn persuaded them to let him live. Instead, Loras had most of his money taken, and the Presidium made a great spell to take away his magic."

Grimm looked close to tears. "But what did he do, Doorkeeper? He's a good man, a nice man!"

The major-domo felt hot-cold spears of panic lancing through his nerves. He knew he could never bring himself to tell Grimm the full truth. He knew his diplomatic skills and his way with words were poor; nonetheless, he tried to sweeten the bitter pill as best he could.

"Grimm; Loras Afelnor was a very, very kind man," he said, putting what he hoped was a grandfatherly hand on the boy's shoulder. "I mustn't tell you too much, but I will ask you: would your grandfather help a sick, old man who was in great pain?"

The child still looked confused, but he nodded.

Doorkeeper locked Grimm's eyes with a serious gaze. "Well, that's just what he did. He helped an old man, but he shouldn't have done."

Grimm's expression showed little more comprehension than before, and Doorkeeper stared at the ceiling for a few moments, wondering how he could escape from the tangle in which he found himself. Then, welcome inspiration flooded into his mind, and he stifled a sigh of relief.

"Grimm, do you eat with your elbows on the table?"

"Of course not!" the boy cried. "You mustn't do that."

"Why not?" Doorkeeper asked.

"Because... I don't know, but you mustn't!"

Doorkeeper wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. "Well, it was like that. There are rules you have to obey, although you don't know why they're important. There are rules like that in the House, too."

Doorkeeper continued, "Loras thought he was doing a good thing, but he broke an important rule. He didn't mean to hurt anyone, but the rules said he had to be punished."

Grimm nodded slowly. "Granfer and Gramma don't like me giving food to our dog, Brush, but he looks so hungry sometimes. One time, I

gave Brush some chicken bones, even though I knew I shouldn't." His face fell. "Brush was very sick, and Granfer was very angry with me."

"Then you understand, Grimm. We have rules, but sometimes we think we're doing the right thing by breaking them."

Grimm nodded, looking relieved. "It was like me giving Brush those bones?"

"Almost, Grimm," Doorkeeper said. "But rules are rules. I'm sure Lord Thorn would be glad to take in the grandson of his old friend, but he might not be able to do so. Lord Thorn has the good of the House to think of."

Grimm opened his mouth, but any words were smothered by a cavernous yawn. It was plain the lad had further questions to ask, but his fluttering eyelids spoke of incipient exhaustion.

Doorkeeper decided to spare Grimm any further details; whatever Thorn's eventual decision concerning the boy might be, there were more pressing matters to which to attend.

"Now, Grimm, I think it must be well past your bedtime. There's a pallet in the corner, and I think it would be best if you had some sleep after your long journey. It's been a very busy day for you."

The effort of Grimm's long climb up the mountain path now seemed to take its toll, and Grimm allowed himself to be bedded down. As soon as his head touched the pillow, the exhausted child was asleep. Doorkeeper covered him with a blanket and spoke a small, simple charm, painstakingly memorised some decades before, to ensure that the boy slept well. He wiped some sweat from his brow, for even the simple spell of Calm Repose, one of the first Minor Magics taught to lowly Neophytes, had cost him no little effort.

Grimm slept fitfully. In place of the familiar sounds and smells of the smithy, the distant clangs and jangles of pots and pans drifted into his sensorium. From time to time, his legs twitched, as if he were still trudging up the long mountain path, and he began to dream.

He saw Granfer Loras standing before him in his smithy clothes, teaching him the names of plants and animals. Now, Granfer had made a kite for him, and he laughed with glee as it flew into the air.

The wind howled and the clouds turned dark; in sudden fear, he turned to see Granfer Loras in silk robes, the normal, close-cropped, blue smoothness of his pate replaced by a long shock of white hair. Lightning played around his brows, and his expression was stern and

frightening. Grimm turned to run, but he found himself confronted by a large group of chanting, jeering mages, each one bearing his grandfather's face and expression. They grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him to a makeshift gallows, laughing as they did so...

The terrifying, confusing dream gave way to dark, formless sleep, and he found peace at last.

Chapter 3: Thorn and Lizaveta

The previous night's storm was spent, and cheerful, orange rays of sun played on the flagstones outside the House. The building was quiet apart from the rustling, creaking form of Doorkeeper shuffling through the hall from the scullery.

Doorkeeper, keeping his promise to the boy, Afelnor, carried Grimm's package up the winding staircase to Lord Thorn's chamber at first light. The child was still asleep, and Doorkeeper had seen no reason to disturb him. He ascended the steps with some trepidation, as he always found the prospect of an early morning meeting with the Prelate a daunting affair. As Doorkeeper approached the chamber door, a deep, apparently bored voice sounded: "Enter, Doorkeeper."

The old mage was humbled as ever by this evidence of the Prelate's magical power, not realising that the carillon of creaking joints and incomprehensible muttering that always accompanied his progress was signal enough to announce his approach. The aged major-domo opened the door and bowed courteously. The chamber was small but well-appointed, with sumptuous tapestries hanging from every wall. In the centre of the room was a tall, beautifully carved mahogany throne with a marble table before it, bearing scrolls, books and potions in untidy abandon and a green scrying-crystal mounted on a chased silver base.

On the throne sat a portly man with thin wisps of white hair plastered across a high, shining pate. The dark eyes that fixed Doorkeeper's gaze were a little dull, and more than a little bloodshot, but there was no denying the power in the Prelate's visage. Evidently, Lord Thorn had over-extended himself in his previous night's revelries, but this was not surprising to Doorkeeper in view of the onerous demands of the responsibilities that must surely pertain to the post of Prelate and House Lord. The man was a Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank and a formidable magic-user, but a man nonetheless, sacrilegious as the fact might seem to the major-domo.

Thorn regarded the nervous man before him with some irritation. The two had known each other for most of Thorn's eighty years, ever since the future Prelate had entered the ranks of the House as a humble Student. Ever since his accession to the title of Prelate, the

ancient Doorkeeper had regarded him with awe and trepidation. Thorn's hangover had been kept at bay by the use of some minor magic, and so his mood was somewhat better than it might have been had he been a Secular. Nonetheless, he was none too pleased at being disturbed at this early hour: even a Mage of the Seventh Rank needed to sleep sometimes.

"What is it, Doorkeeper?" he growled. When tired, hungry or overworked, Thorn had an easily roused temper, one which had often caused him trouble with the Magemasters in his youth, although he never let it affect his magic. There would be no measured words and tones here, such as those Thorn would have used to address the Presidium. Brief conversation was best when the Prelate was in a bad mood, but Thorn knew this was not Doorkeeper's forte.

"Lord Thorn, there's a boy in the scullery. I hope you don't mind, but I gave him a bed and some food. It was horribly cold and wet out there last night, you know, and I just thought-"

Thorn raised a hand to stop the flow of prattle from Doorkeeper. He sighed and, with difficulty, mustered a patient manner; angry words tended to cow the timid old man and to prolong exchanges. The Prelate's tone was nonetheless cool in the extreme, belying his placatory words.

"That's all right, Doorkeeper; I am sure that you will look after him well. What I would like to know is why you thought it necessary to disturb me over the arrival of some bedraggled indigent, especially at such an early hour. Such matters are scarcely my concern."

Doorkeeper wrung his hands in discomfort. "Ah, he, er, he wants to become a Mage, Lord Thorn. He's very keen to talk to you."

Thorn sighed. "The more proper channel for such an application is through the Magemaster on night duty in the Scholasticate, as you well know. What is so urgent that you must disturb me at this hour?"

"Lord Thorn, he gave me a package with a Guild ring in it. I was half ready for bed myself when he came, but, of course, I ran to the hall as soon as the portal opened. I have to, you see..."

Thorn raised a dismissive hand again, and sighed even more theatrically than before. "Go on, then."

Doorkeeper hesitated and then held out the waxed package in a timid manner, with an expression like that on the face of a stranded seal pup, an expression which had never failed to irritate Thorn. How the quivering old fool before him had ever managed to become a mage was quite beyond the Prelate's comprehension, and he was far from alone in this view. As Thorn took the package, he sensed the unmistakable presence of a Guild Ring.

The old fool had spoken the truth, but, then again, even that senile dullard wore a similar ring, so that meant little. The boy's father

might be some superannuated Reader, or even a Doorkeeper from another House; scarcely a cause for such great excitement. Thorn thought of saying so, but he summoned the self-control expected of a Mage of the Seventh Rank, drew a sharp breath and forced himself to be calm. Sarcasm might have an even more negative effect than ire on the hapless major-domo.

With some effort, Thorn managed a passable simulacrum of a seraphic smile and said in a falsely honeyed voice, "Thank you, Doorkeeper, that will be all for now. Well done. You may go."

As the door closed behind Doorkeeper, Thorn looked the package over carefully. The aura surrounding it seemed familiar to him and yet he could not place it. Satisfied that the packet contained no threat, he opened it and found inside a letter and a Guild Ring, which somehow seemed to resonate with mastery. Intrigued, the Prelate opened the letter within, and was surprised to see not an illiterate scrawl but elegant, educated handwriting which spoke of its originator's erudition.

The Smithy,
Lower Frunstock,
Addleton

My beloved former brother mage and fellow Questor, I offer my deepest respect and most heartfelt salutations!

It is only after deep meditation that I send my grandson Grimm Afelnor to you, with the desire that you confer upon him the honour of taking him in as a Student. I understand well the deep misgivings you must hold at the prospect of taking to the Guild's bosom the seed of a traitor and renegade such as I.

The child knows nothing of my past, and I beg that you preserve this blissful ignorance whether you accept him or no. It is not just that a boy's life be blighted by the sins of his forebears, heinous though they may be.

It is as hard for me to write this letter as I am sure it will be for you to read it. I am currently employed as a smith in the hamlet of Lower Frunstock; but my health is no longer so rude as once it was, and it is becoming ever harder for my wife, Drima, and me to look after our orphaned grandson, Grimm.

He is a remarkably perceptive boy, with more than a trace of the power that once I bore, and he knows much beyond his seven years. He sees auras and can perform dowsing and other minor charms without having received a whit of training in these disciplines from me. He is gifted in languages, arithmetic and music, and his grandmother and I have taught him what we can of the secular arts.

He is a solemn, studious boy, ill-suited to the harsh, physical life of a smith. With the little sleight left to me, I sense the growing power

within him. He is fluent in most of the tongues of this region, and he writes a fair hand in all of these. I know well that he has the beginnings of the Mage Sight, and I am confident that, should you do him the great honour of accepting the child as a Student, he will repay you and, indeed, the Guild many times over.

It is not for my own sake that I ask this, for I know only too well how little charity I deserve from you. I ask it for the good of a blameless child and for the enrichment and honour of the Guild that once I loved and swore to serve.

I do feel that in sending this intelligent and diligent boy to you in the hope that he may one day become a mage might go some small way towards expiating some of the heavy guilt that burdens my soul so. I enclose the ring I once wore with such fierce pride, in the fervent hope that it may some day be placed on the finger of my grandson, trusting that he will expunge a measure of the infamy and shame that I placed upon it.

Whatever you decide, I know that your choice will be fairly and justly made.

Your devoted servant and former Brother Mage,
Loras Afelnor

Thorn's hands trembled as if palsied, and the letter fell to the desk. Deeply troubled, he climbed to his feet and for a few minutes paced the room like a caged animal, brow furrowed in thought and heavy breaths shivering his body. Indecision racked him, but he knew that he had only one course of action. He sat down again. He took a green velvet bag from a desk drawer and extracted from it a glass orb, which he placed in the centre of his desk. He took a deep breath and put his hands gingerly on the globe, which began to emit an eerie, bile-green glow in response.

Mother, are you there?

After a few minutes' pause, Thorn felt the familiar mental tendrils of his mother, Lizaveta, winding their way into his sensorium like maggots squirming through a decaying cadaver.

What do you want, Thorn? I am busy training the latest group of novices in the ways of the Order. They are lazy and obdurate; they require constant attention and chastisement. Do you not remember the rule? I contact you; you do not contact me.

Mother, I thought that you ought to know that Loras Afelnor is not dead, as I had formerly assumed. He has sent his grandson to me, requesting that he be taken into the House as a charity Student. The Lord Dominie might find it strange, were I to refuse such a request from a former Guild Mage, even from a convicted renegade such as Loras. The chances of such a boy possessing significant levels of Thaumaturgic power would be far higher than for the son of a Secular.

I could plead a lack of places at the Scholasticate, but High Lodge well knows that I am campaigning vigorously in an attempt to attract more charity Students.

Thorn could have sworn that a disdainful snort sounded in his brain.

What is the problem, Thorn? Why do you need to bother me with your wheedling? It is your Guild House, not mine.

The Prelate sighed. This might be harder than he had thought. What if the child knows the truth about what was done to Loras, Mother?

Ha! Even the mighty Loras Afelnor has no idea of what motivated him to attempt to throttle that senile old fool, Geral. My spell was subtle, as well as powerful; Loras believes he acted as he did on his own volition. Do you truly believe he would send his brat to you for education if he had even the merest suspicion of the spell I cast on him?

The child will never find out the truth unless you are foolish enough to tell him; do you understand?

I understand, Mother, but it still makes me nervous, admitted Thorn.

So the mighty Thorn Virias, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank is scared of an infant! came back Lizaveta's hissing stream of mental words. If you feel incompetent to deal with him, send him to me. No man has ever been able to withstand my will, not even Loras. He was ten times the man or the mage that you will ever be. I think that I could have really enjoyed Loras as my own pet in those days. Muscular, intelligent, powerful, possessed of great willpower... yet even he succumbed to my power.

I like strong men; I like it when they try to stand against me. I like to see the look on their faces at the moment that they finally realise their mistake, just before they drop to their knees, begging for mercy. I trust you are not pretending you are a 'strong man', my dear son...

There was a lengthy pause, inviting further challenge from Thorn, but he remained silent. He knew Lizaveta would be wearing a thin smile, her most dangerous expression, and he knew how his mother liked to control and dominate him or, indeed, any other man.

As usual, the mighty Prelate was thoroughly cowed by this wizened prune of a witch. At times, he hated his mother with a burning passion, yet he could never win free of her, could never win true independence. Without her, he was nothing.

Accept the child, Thorn, hissed Lizaveta's words in his head. Even if he proves no mage, it could be fun to have your own Afelnor as a scullery brat. If he should grow to resemble his grandfather, I may

even pay him a friendly visit. If Loras' blood runs true and the lad should become a Questor one-tenth as powerful as his grandfather, he will be a useful token to put in play, as you move towards your destiny as Lord Dominie of High Guild. A Questor even half as powerful as Loras, who owed all loyalty and fealty to you, would be a potent weapon indeed.

If I ever become Dominie, Mother, it will be because I will it, not you! Thorn snapped mentally, a trace of rebellion flickering briefly within him.

You aren't trying to be strong, are you, my darling son? Remember what I said about men who try to oppose me. I will not stand that from any man, least of all my ingrate oaf of a son, and I do not think that you would prove much of a challenge. After all I have done for you, I expect humility and gratitude, not whining and braggadocio.

You will work to become Dominie in order to gratify me, to show me that all my work on your behalf has not been for nothing. You will accept Afelnor's grandson into the House because it amuses me, and because it may eventually advance this goal. If you do not see the truth in my words, I have more than enough power to make you see. Is that clear?

Thorn gulped; what his mother had said was all too true. She could snap his will like a dry twig underfoot, and she would do so without a second thought. Thorn knew the folly of displeasing her only too well, so he assumed a more complaisant tone.

Yes, Mother, it is clear. I meant no disrespect. If the Afelnor boy has true power, I will accept him as a Student. However, it would be at least a decade before he could become a Questor; twenty years if he would be better suited as a Reader, and far longer if his vocation is as another kind of mage. As you must know, a Student's antecedents cannot guarantee his calling.

In order to advance my case further with High Lodge, I need to take in far more Students, because I need more mages; I am working on that. The quickest solution would be to take on more charity Students, so that I may put a few more Neophytes through the Questor Ordeal. Even that is uncertain and time consuming.

You are soft, Thorn, spat back Lizaveta. All those years spent sitting in comfortable armchairs and drinking yourself stupid have dulled your resolve. If your recalcitrant Neophytes do not respond well to this Ordeal you speak of, it is because it is not sufficiently rigorous. A more severe lesson is a shorter lesson, is it not?

It is not that simple, Mother, complained Thorn, trying to make the old woman see sense. Some Neophyte Questors risk becoming unhinged by the Ordeal as it is.

Then they are weaklings who are not worthy to carry the Staff, she snarled. I am sure even you are more than wily enough to cover up the odd accident. You do not need milksops, but powerful mages under your full control. Remember that, and act accordingly.

I will tolerate no further excuses from you, Thorn. You must resolve such problems on your own from now on.

With an unpleasant mental slither, the slimy form of his mother's will withdrew from Thorn's mind, leaving the Prelate alone in his chamber, with only a parcel of vague fears and worries for company.

The Prelate felt many misgivings, but he would see this boy on the morrow; he preferred an easy life, and it was far simpler to go along with his mother than to try to oppose her. Thorn put away the scrying-crystal and wandered over to a wrought-iron washstand by the window, washing his face and hands in the porcelain bowl, as if this could wash away the taint of his mother's influence over him.

He went back to sit in reverie at his worktable. His thoughts were of earlier, happier times with another young Afelnor, a youth with whom he had played and exchanged jokes and tricks.

Acclaimed on the very same day, each had warmly toasted the other's success.

Good days...

The sick memory of how he had duped and betrayed his blood brother swam into his daydreaming like a hungry shark, devouring the quietude he sought.

Rubbing a trembling hand over his aching brow, he summoned Doorkeeper with a brief, telepathic pulse.

When the major-domo arrived, twitching and trembling as ever, the Prelate cut through the old man's twittering prattle with a curt wave of his hand.

"Bring the Afelnor boy to me early tomorrow morning, Doorkeeper. You are dismissed."

The major-domo left with a clumsy bow, and the Prelate was alone again.

Chapter 4: The Prelate

"Quickly, quickly; chop-chop! Do hurry, boy. The Prelate doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Doorkeeper wrung his hands with nervous fervour, as Grimm swam his way into a clean robe plainly intended for a larger boy.

When the child was finished, Doorkeeper took a step back to assess his charge. Grimm's face shone lobster-pink after vigorous scrubbing, and his hair was neatly tied behind the neck. Despite the over-large clothes, the overall effect was not too comical, and the boy looked much more presentable than he had when he had first arrived at the House.

"All right, boy, you'll do. Come along now." As Doorkeeper led the way out of the scullery, Grimm struggled to keep up without tripping over the hem of his voluminous robe. At almost every step of the way, the major-domo called out instructions on how the boy must comport himself in the presence of the Prelate.

He was not to speak unless directly addressed; he must address Thorn only as 'Lord Prelate'; he must bow on entering and on leaving the chamber; he was to volunteer no information not specifically requested by the Prelate. The list seemed endless to Grimm, who was breathing heavily by the time the pair had ascended the stairs to Thorn's chamber.

Before the old man's fist had touched the door, a voice boomed from within. "Enter, Doorkeeper."

The major-domo motioned Grimm to approach the Prelate's large and forbidding desk, and the boy managed a passable bow. He gazed at the stone floor, barely daring to breathe. This was a mighty wizard.

"Lord Thorn, this is the boy I told you about, here as you commanded."

"You may leave, Doorkeeper," intoned the Prelate in an off-hand tone, and Grimm heard the door close behind him. As long minutes passed, he waited nervously to be addressed as Doorkeeper had advised him, aware that the senior mage's eyes were seriously appraising him.

"Your name is Grimm Afelnor, is it not?" asked the Prelate.

Grimm nodded, his nerves stopping his tongue. With an effort, the child managed to whisper "Yes, Lord Prelate."

More moments passed. "Do you know why you are here, child?"

In a slightly stronger voice, Grimm replied, "Granfer... my grandfather wants me to become a magician, Lord Prelate."

"The term used within the Guild is 'mage', Grimm. A magician is merely a town performer, a mountebank, a bumbling purveyor of

simple charms and illusions with which to bedazzle the uneducated and the credulous."

Grimm felt a little bedazzled himself at several of the strange words the Prelate used, but he held his tongue as Doorkeeper had ordered.

"A mage is a true master of the arcane arts, a man to be feared and respected, a man with true dedication and willpower. Do you think that, one day, you could become such a man, Grimm Afelnor?"

"I don't know, Lord Prelate."

"Look into my eyes, child," said Thorn softly. Grimm reluctantly raised his head, and he saw for the first time the face of the Prelate. Heavy eyebrows hung like hovering birds of prey over a pair of amber eyes that seemed to burn like coals, windows to the mighty will blazing within.

Grimm forced himself to lock his gaze upon Thorn's eyes, suppressing the strong urge to look away. After a few moments, the boy's eyes began to water, but he let the tears run down his cheeks unchecked.

After it seemed as if an age had passed, Thorn nodded.

"That is good. You have willpower, one of the most important attributes of a mage. You have self-control: that is another. However, it will take more, much more, to become a mage. If I do decide to accept you as Student, it will be on harsh terms.

"Most Students within this House are here because their families have money and influence. They may leave at any time, with no penalty save a financial consideration. If accepted, you will be taken in as a charity case. If we decide that you have not given of your best at any time, you may be required to remit the cost of your schooling in any capacity that we may decide, as a scullion or other menial for as long as we require. This will not normally be for a period of less than twenty years, due to the great expense that the House will have lavished on you.

"This is no ordinary school, young Afelnor. Some labour for decades to carry the staff and ring that denote a true mage. The majority fall by the wayside, having learnt a few trifling competencies and nothing more. A paying Student may leave at any time, whereas you will be required to stay here as long as we may deem fit, in order to reclaim the effort that we have put into your education. We are talking of many years of struggle, Grimm Afelnor.

"Before I accept you as Student, I ask you to think of the years ahead of you. Will you give your heart and your soul to us, to use as we see fit? You are young, and you can have no concept of the gulf of time ahead of you.

"Nevertheless, we require your word and your bond to give us

your all. Will you serve this House and this Guild with all your heart?"

Grimm stifled a sob. From what little he could understand of the Prelate's speech, it seemed that Lord Thorn had told him he might never, ever see his home again. To a seven-year-old child, this talk of years of effort seemed an eternity of loneliness, a vast empty chasm separating him from everything he had known. However, his grandfather, the gentle, loving man who had brought him up for all the time he could remember, had pleaded with tearful eyes for Grimm to submit to the will of the Guild for as long as was necessary.

Although Grimm recognised that Granfer Loras had his best interests at heart, the prospect of an uncertain future weighed on him heavily. He had to admit, even to himself, that to succeed to his grandfather's position might have been difficult, but, in truth, Grimm had found much of the fetching and carrying in the smithy too hard for him. Although he possessed a certain wiry strength, he lacked the more solid musculature and bone structure that might make a competent smith of him in later life.

He preferred the company of books to that of other children, and only Granfer had understood when Grimm had talked of the colours that he could sometimes see around people when they were happy, sad, lying or speaking the truth. He had even helped Grimm to recognise better the colours invoked by various emotions and moods. It was shortly after Grimm had first mentioned the colours that Granfer had begun to speak of Grimm entering the Guild.

Grimm knew what his grandfather wanted for him and, even if the road might be hard, it was enough for the boy to know that it was what Granfer Loras wanted.

Swallowing hard in an attempt to dislodge the lump in his throat, Grimm spoke. "Yes, Lord Prelate, I promise to do my best for the Guild for as long as you want. I will try my hardest to make you and my grandfather proud of me."

Thorn ran his hand through his greasy, thinning hair and bowed his head for a moment, plainly deep in thought. For a hopeful heartbeat or two, Grimm wondered if the Prelate intended to send him back home, but Lord Thorn's next words robbed him of this hope.

"Grimm Afelnor, you are hereby accepted into the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges as a Student in this House," droned Lord Thorn, as if reciting a litany. "You will receive whatever training and education the Presidium of this House may see fit to bestow upon you.

"In return, you will diligently and enthusiastically comply with all instructions and orders given by your superiors, and with all the rules and ordinances of the House, which will be duly explained to you. No visitors will be allowed during your training, save by my specific

permission. That is all. Doorkeeper!"

The major-domo must have been waiting outside the door, since he swiftly entered the room.

"Afelnor is accepted as Student, Doorkeeper. Take him to the Scholasticate and instruct him in the ways of the House. That is all."

Doorkeeper bowed and motioned Grimm to follow suit, whereupon the old mage swept the child out of the room.

After the door had shut and the footsteps had faded, Thorn took a bottle of liquor from a drawer and drank deeply, calming his nerves.

The power in the child's eyes had reminded him too much of Loras Afelnor's intense gaze. Taking up the scrying-crystal, he summoned the Head of the Scholasticate, Urel Shelit, to his room.

"Greetings, Lord Prelate."

"Greetings to you also, Senior Magemaster Urel. I have a new charity Student, Grimm Afelnor by name. He joins us today."

Urel raised his eyebrows. "Afelnor, you say. Surely it cannot be his son?"

"His grandson, in fact," Thorn drawled, as if such an event happened every day.

"He has power within him, of course, or I would not have accepted him into the House. You know the rules, Urel. Under such circumstances I could scarcely have rejected him, whatever his antecedents."

"Of course, Lord Thorn, I understand completely."

"How very perspicacious of you," Thorn replied acidly. The earlier communication with his mother had left him somewhat dyspeptic; or, perhaps the drink he had consumed the night before had had more effect on him than he had thought.

Collecting himself, he apologised. "I am sorry, Urel, I should not have spoken to you in that manner. I have a lot on my mind at present."

"No apology is necessary, Lord Thorn. We all know the responsibilities of your position place a great burden upon your shoulders."

"Thank you for your understanding, Senior Magemaster. I wish it understood that young Afelnor is a Student like any other, and I do not wish him to be victimised for the acts of his grandfather.

"He is here to learn and, good fortune permitting, to progress to

the limits of his abilities and skills. He seems intelligent and respectful, and I do not imagine that you are likely to find him problematic within the Scholasticate.

"Doorkeeper is with him at present. Kindly assign the boy a cell in the Charity Wing and ensure that the Magemasters are all aware that he is to be treated as any other charity Student. He belongs to you now, and I trust that, one day, you will have cause to be proud of him."

"Lord Thorn, I would never tolerate victimisation of any of my young Students. I will ensure that he is treated according to his abilities and achievements and not according to his ancestry."

Apparently realising he was speech-making, Urel cleared his throat and returned to the matter in hand. "I will put him in Cell 17, Lord Prelate. I would be grateful if you could relay that to Doorkeeper. I will inform the Magemasters of the new arrival immediately upon leaving your office."

Thorn put his hand to his temple and muttered a phrase. "It is done, Senior Magemaster. Now, will you sit for a while and accept a glass of Lurian brandy? I have here a particularly good example of its type. I receive so few callers here in person."

"I would be delighted to share your liquor with you for a while, Lord Prelate. I have not tasted that particular beverage for a decade or more."

Thorn poured Urel a generous portion of the golden liquid, which the Magemaster accepted with a nod of gratitude. Thorn poured himself an even larger quantity and settled back comfortably in his chair, on familiar territory now.

"I always liked Afelnor, ever since we were Students together," Urel said, the fire of the expensive brandy seeming to loosen his tongue. "Whatever possessed him to attempt to murder Lord Prelate Geral? We all loved Geral, and I had often heard Loras speak highly of him."

Thorn had handled similar questions many times before, and he was not fazed. "Loras was my firmest friend within the House as you know, Urel. I would no more have expected him to attack Geral than to assault me. I suspect that he despaired at the old Prelate's illness, as we all did, and sought to relieve him of further suffering. It was with a heavy heart that I exposed his act to the Presidium and watched him stripped of his powers. Yet the rules were clear. Justice, no matter how painful, had to be done."

"He took his punishment with great dignity, and I was pleased to see that."

"He did. Let us see that his chastisement does not extend to his grandson." Noticing that Urel had finished his brandy, Thorn wanted

to refill the Senior Magemaster's glass, but he did not move to do so. The Prelate was often lonely and maudlin, but he knew this was the price that had to be paid if he was ever to rule the Guild and get his hated mother off his back. He recognised, only too well, the demon of depression as it hopped onto his shoulders, and he resolutely dismissed it.

"Thank you for your company, Urel. I have enjoyed our little discussion. However, I am afraid that I have some urgent matters to attend to. Would you excuse me?" Urel bowed and left, and Thorn was alone again with his papers and his problems.

Chapter 5: Cell 17

Doorkeeper led Grimm through an iron gate, and the colourful opulence of the Great Hall was replaced by a dull green and grey; a musty smell filled the air.

"This is the Charity Wing of the Scholasticate, Grimm," intoned the major-domo. "You may stay here for a long time, but the years will soon fly, believe you me! Sometimes, I wish I was back here as a Student. It would free me from all my obligations; they seem so hard at times. So hard..."

He sighed mournfully in self-pity and assumed his official manner once more. "The normal term doesn't begin for another two weeks, and so there will be very few Students here for a while, just other charity boys. The paying Students are allowed home at the end of term, although you, as a charity boy, will not be allowed leave unless granted special permission by your Magemaster or by Lord Thorn.

"I think there are a few other charity Students within the House at this time, so there should be a few other boys of your own age for you to make friends with. Here, this is your cell."

They had stopped in an ill-lit corridor outside a door bearing the number 17. "This will be your number as long as you are a Student here. Your clothes will bear this number, and the Magemasters who teach you may address you as number 17. Some of the Magemasters don't have such a good memory for names as I do."

Doorkeeper opened the door to show a clean but dismal room. The walls were painted in cabbage-green with off-white tiles up to knee height. The small room's accoutrements were few: a brass bed with a thin mattress and a neatly-folded but threadbare bedroll; an off-white, crazed ceramic washbowl; a rickety chair set beside a small, round, wooden table; and a warped bookshelf bearing a single volume.

The major-domo moved to the shelf and handed its sole occupant to Grimm: a weighty tome bearing the title Rules and Regulations of the Scholasticate in black on a battered brown leather cover. "Read this book carefully, Grimm. It's very important, yes, very important, and you may be tested on it.

"It contains all the rules and regulations for charity Students, for the Guild in general, and for this House in particular. The Magemasters and seniors may ask you questions about it at any time, and you'd better be able to answer them without a moment's thought, or you may be punished. We don't want that, now, do we?"

Grimm shook his head, mute in his encroaching misery.

"There's a similar book for the paying Students," continued

Doorkeeper, "but the rules aren't as strict. The House needs money, and most of it comes from the parents of the rich boys. Make sure that you know all the Rules by heart, and be sure to obey them all."

Grimm nodded wordlessly, his heart too full to speak. "I will be back to take you to luncheon in a few hours," said Doorkeeper. "Don't try to get back into the Hall; you won't be able to. But I think the Scholasticate will be a large enough world for you, even over the long time to come.

"Be strong, Grimm; the loneliness will pass soon enough once your studies have begun, and you will find your days full to bursting with new knowledge, new friends and new experiences. Be strong for me."

Doorkeeper left, closing the door of the cell with a thump that sounded to Grimm like a knell announcing the death of his old, familiar, life in Granfer's smithy.

Cell! The word echoed and rebounded through the boy's head; it sounded as if he were a criminal to be locked up.

Although the door was unlocked, the green walls of the cell seemed to close in on Grimm. He felt a swift, cold shiver of fear run through him. His lungs seemed to have turned to stone, and he felt unable to breathe properly.

With a mighty effort, he forced himself to draw a few, deep breaths, and he tried to take stock of the situation, but he felt hot tears begin to well from his eyes, unbidden. A jagging sob racked him, as a heavy wave of desperate homesickness washed over him.

He lay face down on the bed and wept with bitter anguish for a few minutes until it seemed he would break in two. With one last shuddering sob, he forced himself to sit up. For a few moments, he gasped like a beached whale until his breathing normalised. With stolid determination, he planted himself in the chair and picked up the book that Doorkeeper had said was so important.

The pages were yellowed and obviously well-thumbed. How many boys had read this before him? The number 17, which was stamped on the flyleaf, told him that the book belonged in this very cell, and Grimm felt a kind of communion with the previous incumbents of the cell. He hoped they had all become mages rather than scullery servants.

The first part of the book was interesting enough, detailing the history of the Guild and the House. Apparently, Arnor House was actually a hundred and fifty years older than the Guild itself. The Guild had been inaugurated four hundred years before by common consent between several feuding groups of magic-users, the Arnor Institute for the Arcane Arts among them.

The founding of High Lodge gave the squabbling organisations

guidance and a common purpose. Eventually, more and more Houses joined the new Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges until it became the premier organisation for magic throughout the land.

Each House paid a certain amount to High Lodge every year, based on its ability to pay. High Lodge had the right to request temporary or permanent secondment of magic-users or scholars to the governing Lodge for the fulfilment of certain spells, or to ensure that there was always a full complement of mages at High Lodge. In return, the House was assured non-aggression from all other Guild Houses, financial aid in times of crisis and exclusive authority for all matters magical in its locality.

The highest honour for any Guild Mage was to be elected to the post of Lord Dominie of the Guild, who could only be selected from among the ranks of High Lodge every year.

A few brief paragraphs gave sketchy details of former Guild notables, and then the main part of the book began.

Student!

You have been granted the honour of induction into the Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges. This is an august and venerable establishment, and you are privileged to have become a part of it.

As a Student at Arnor Guild House, you have the responsibility to heed and obey the rules of the Guild and of the House. Read these well. The House Magemasters will accept no ignorance of the regulations as an excuse for failing to observe them, and punishments will be assessed against each transgression, up to and excluding dismissal from the Scholasticate and the Guild.

Section 1-Comportment and Bearing

Subsection 1-Conduct

Rule 1.1.1: A Student shall, at all times, maintain a deferent and respectful manner towards all Mages, Neophytes, Adepts and Scholars.

Grimm thought that seemed easy enough. He had been brought up to be respectful to his elders. He could only guess at what the word 'deferent' might mean, but he guessed it meant 'polite'.

Rule 1.1.2: A Student shall obey diligently all orders and instructions given him by all Mages, Neophytes, Acolytes, Adepts and Scholars, excepting where such orders conflict with prior or subsequent countermanding orders given by the Prelate or the Student's class Magemaster, or except where such orders conflict with any other Guild Rule, or a Guild-approved House Rule. It shall at all times be considered that any orders given by the Prelate or Magemaster may be considered as licit, without reference to other rules and strictures.

Grimm could barely understand the ramifications of this Rule. He read through it carefully three times and it made little more sense to him. Deciding to return to this complicated rule later, he read on.

Rule 1.1.3: Except where explicitly permitted by the Student's Magemaster, or other licit authority, a Student shall at all times maintain a high standard of decorum and comportment...

The list went on and on in the same dry, impenetrable, prolix style. Grimm's eyes grew larger as the pages began to detail former freedoms now denied him. He would not be allowed to leave the Scholasticate for as long as his training lasted, a period of many years, or until he was dismissed to serve in the bowels of the House.

Although three meals were provided each day, woe betide the Student who was not in the Refectory by the time the tolling of the bell ended, for he would lose this meal and the next, in penance for the waste of food.

The requirements for cleanliness and neatness were rigorous. Rules were detailed for the laying out of dirty clothes for washing and for taking a bath. Each of these rituals was to be performed once a week at a specified time, and missing the narrow period allowed for these would result in the Student going dirty for the next week, and a 'Schedule D, paragraph 1 punishment' for poor hygiene if the Student could not otherwise keep himself clean. Grimm had no idea what a 'Schedule D punishment' was, but he guessed it would be severe.

The only alternative Grimm could see was to wash himself and his clothes with plain cold water in the small washbasin, an unappealing prospect, although the hygiene facilities, in truth, were little worse than those in his home smithy.

Hair was to be no longer than would fall to the bottom of the shoulder-blades, and it was to be kept clean and tied back.

Rules for the wearing of beards and whiskers were also specified, which gave Grimm a new reminder of how long he might need to stay in the Scholasticate.

Poor Students were expected to keep their robes in good condition and a needle and thread was provided for the repair of minor damage, but he who entered the Refectory or a schoolroom with torn or shoddily repaired robes would again be punished. Fortunately, Grimm had been used to darning and sewing for almost as long as he could walk. The smithy produced enough wealth for food and shelter but little else, and Gramma Drima's arthritic fingers rarely had been equal to the task.

Grimm read on for an hour, rule after rule and restriction after restriction. It seemed that the House consisted of nothing but constraints and strictures, and he began to despair of ever keeping track of the rules, let alone being able to quote them on demand. Even

the sole movable objects in his cell, the chair, the table and the bed, had to be kept in precise, fixed locations and orientations.

He did not even understand many of the rules; whatever 'unnatural practices' were, he had no idea, and Grimm wondered if they involved play-acting. He was extremely well read for a boy of his age, but words like 'narcotics', 'impropriety' and 'insubordination' were beyond him. How could he obey the rules if he didn't know what they meant? He was in trouble before he had even begun as a Student.

An unbearable weight of despair began once more to descend onto the boy's narrow shoulders, and another sob escaped his lips. Why had Granfer sent him to this place, so heavy with pomp, ceremony and regulations, where most of the boys came from families rich beyond Grimm's wildest dreams?

At least, if he had been sent to the local school, he could have mixed with other boys like himself, boys from working families like his own. He knew how his grandfather loved him, but the idea that the kindly, grizzled old smith could willingly send his grandson to be immured in such a stark, lonely prison for many years was beyond Grimm, and tears of self-pity began to well unbidden from his eyes.

Lost in misery, with endless unanswerable questions flying endlessly around his mind like balls in a frenetic billiards game, Grimm started at the sound of a knock at the cell door. He did not expect Doorkeeper back for some time yet. He composed himself, managing to utter a faint and tremulous "Come in".

The door opened with a weary-sounding creak, to reveal a tall man of maybe twenty-five years. Long, dark hair tumbled down over the visitor's shoulders, and his calm face was framed with a neatly-trimmed, brown beard.

He wore simple, brown, homespun robes like Grimm's, but he bore an ornate, blue metal ring on his marriage finger and a six-foot, brass-shod staff, which the boy now recognised as the outward marks of a mage. Grimm expected a thundering bass voice to issue from the man's lips, but he was pleasantly surprised by the gentle tones he heard.

"Doorkeeper told me there was a new charity boy; we're few and far between in this august establishment, so I thought I would take the opportunity to introduce myself: I am Questor Dalquist Rufior."

Chapter 6: Two New Friends

Grimm gave a deep, stiff bow.

"Lord Mage, I am Grimm Afelnor. I am pleased to meet you, sir."

The words were stiff and grave, betokening the formality of a rote-learned phrase. Dalquist noted the telltale, grubby spoor of tears extending from the lower margins of the boy's eyes. It was plain to the Questor that Grimm was still struggling to control hot, roiling emotions.

Dalquist smiled warmly. "There's no need to call me either 'Lord Mage' or 'sir', Grimm Afelnor. In truth, I have been a Mage Questor only a month and, since I have no Quests to my name yet, I am still a Questor only in name. Please call me Dalquist, and only that.

"Doorkeeper asked me to visit you because I was once a charity boy like you, and I know just how you feel. You feel betrayed and impossibly alone, don't you, Grimm? All those rules and regulations that apply only to you seem too much to bear-am I right?"

Grimm nodded, and the ghost of a faint smile began to creep across the boy's face before being suppressed.

"It's all right, Grimm," Dalquist said. "I don't remember any rule in the book about charity Students either smiling or enjoying themselves. I know everything seems horribly unfamiliar and forbidding to you now, but I promise you that this will change."

Dalquist pulled himself to his full height, cleared his throat and opened an imaginary scroll. "Rule 17.4.3, paragraph C," he boomed. "Charity Students will smile and enjoy themselves whenever the mood takes them, even if they think it looks better if they wallow in misery instead."

A genuine smile began to emerge on Grimm's face. "It doesn't say that in the book, Dalquist. You're teasing me!"

"That's one of my rules, Grimm, not the Scholasticate's. You can be miserable if you really want to; there will be plenty of time for that later on. Even the Prelate and the Presidium have no power to stop you from going around looking like a dying duck in a thunderstorm if you're determined to suffer. Feel free to mope and grizzle if you wish, and then you will find that nobody wants to be your friend.

"I can't pretend you'll be happy all the time here, but you must make the effort not to take depression as your only companion. Believe me, I know that fellow of old. After a while, depression becomes almost a comfort; when that day comes, you'll find he soon becomes a stricter and more domineering master than anyone in the Scholasticate.

"When you wake in the morning, don't expect the day to be dull

and miserable; just take it as it comes. You may believe it or not, as you choose, but the simple fact is that even some of the paying Students will be as unhappy as you are at being sent away. It's true they can go home twice a year, while you will have to stay here, but they have left their friends and families behind, just as you have.

"You may find you have more in common with those boys than you think, and some of them will become your friends, as unlikely as it appears right now.

"In a few days, the other Students will begin to arrive, and the Magemasters and the other mages will return from their retreats. I know then you'll begin to find this a busy and interesting place."

Grimm proffered only a faint smile, although he could feel a real, wide grin trying to emerge. He knew what self-pity was, and that, unwittingly, he had been wallowing in its depths.

"I'm sorry, Dalquist. I will try to be happy."

The mage shook his head slightly. "No, Grimm, you don't understand. Trying to be happy never works. Sometimes you will be happy; sometimes you won't. Just don't ever, ever, try to be sad. Sometimes you won't be able to avoid misery, but that will happen much more often if you go looking for it.

"There, now, could that really be a genuine smile on that boy's face? Surely not; our new Student, Grimm Afelnor, isn't allowed to smile, is he?" Dalquist punctuated this last with a mock-stern stare.

Grimm giggled and his mouth, overruling his self-imposed misery, crumpled into a genuine smile at last. "That's silly. Nobody wants to be sad."

"Well then; in that case, we don't need to talk about it any more, do we?"

The small boy vigorously shook his head, the point taken. Then, with an abrupt change of subject, typical of a child his age, he asked, "Why aren't you old, Dalquist? I mean really, really old?"

The mage knit his brows for just a moment, and then his face cleared.

"If you mean I'm very young to be a mage, that's true, Grimm," he said. "That's because I'm a Mage Questor. Questors don't take as long to learn as other magic-users because they make their own magic. We aren't so much taught as... encouraged to develop.

"Other types of mage take much longer to win the Staff, because they have to learn a separate incantation or thought pattern for each enchantment."

"I didn't know there were different sorts of wizard... mage, that is," Grimm said. "I think I'd like to be a Questor, too, if it's that quick. My Granfer was a Questor," he added with a tinge of newfound pride.

Dalquist laughed. "Most Students feel the same way once they

find out about Questors, for that reason above all," he said. "But I'm afraid it's not up to you, Grimm. Only the Magemasters can determine what sort of mage you'll become, if any. A lot of Students never become full mages at all, mostly because they give up."

The mage's expression darkened a little. "In your case, Grimm, failure to become a mage isn't a very appealing option, believe me. As a charity boy, you have to work off the expense of your tuition before you can leave, either as a mage or as a House servant. I really don't think you'd enjoy life as a House servant at all.

"On the other hand, I wouldn't worry too much about that prospect if you work hard and apply yourself to your studies. The Prelate doesn't give charity scholarships very often, and you can be sure that he only does so when he can see the glimmerings of some sort of talent."

The Questor smiled again. "I'm sure one day you'll be a mage, Grimm, but neither I nor anybody else could possibly say which kind. Still, I mustn't tell you too much about the training. The Magemasters will explain all to you in good time. Is there anything you'd like to ask me that doesn't involve becoming a mage?"

Grimm thought for a minute. "You said that you were a charity boy like me. Did you have lots of friends here? Are they mages, too?"

"I never had a lot of friends, but the ones I made are good friends still. They're still here as what we call Neophytes or as Adepts, except for two wealthy boys who left. I've promised the others I'll make a point of being present at their Acclamation ceremonies if I can, and I make the same promise to you, Grimm; if I can, I'll make a point of coming to your ceremony; whenever it happens."

"I'd like that, Dalquist. I'll work hard, I promise. Thank you for talking to me; I really feel a lot better now. Are there any other boys like me around?"

Dalquist shrugged. "I'm afraid I don't know, Grimm. The next term starts in two weeks; there'll be plenty of other boys around then."

Grimm's face fell. "Will I be all on my own for two whole weeks?" Cold fingers of loneliness began to play again along his spine.

Dalquist looked a little lost. "There's a yard where you can play," he suggested.

Grimm felt close to tears again. "But I can't play by myself, Dalquist!"

Dalquist cleared his throat, his face blank. "What sort of things do you like to do, Grimm?"

"I like to read books when I can," replied the child, with an earnest expression on his face. "Granfer had quite a lot, and he let me read them when my chores were finished. They were big, grown-up books. There were some about birds and animals and plants, and a lot

of them had nice pictures. I can read books that don't have any pictures, though," he hurriedly assured the mage.

Dalquist's face cleared, and he held out his hand to the boy. "Follow me then, Grimm. I have something to show you." He led Grimm out of his cell and into the long corridor.

There were ten cell doors like Grimm's on each side of the passageway, all of which were open and none of which showed any signs of occupancy. "Are you sure there aren't any other charity boys like me here, Dalquist?" asked Grimm, with a slight tremor at the thought that he might be alone in this dismal corridor for a whole fortnight.

"There is a total of eleven charity Students. Although, there's only to be one other to join us this year, and I don't believe he's arrived yet. There may be other boys of about your age around, but I'm afraid, offhand, I don't know of any. If there are any, they're probably either in the recreation yard or in study rooms. Very few people bother with what I am about to show you. You'll like it, Grimm, I promise."

Tense with expectation, Grimm followed Dalquist to the end of the dark passage. Nearly hidden in shadow was a plain wooden door. The mage opened it and led Grimm up a winding stone staircase, holding tight to the boy's hand, lest Grimm stumble and fall in the near darkness. At the top was another simple door with a gnarled, pitted black ring for a handle. Opening it, Dalquist led the young Student into what, to the child, seemed like a wonderland.

Racks and racks of books stretched to the ceiling and off into the depths of a huge room, a labyrinth of beguiling complexity, full of mystery and promise. Each rack was filled to capacity with books, and Grimm stared in awe at the wealth of literature before him, eyes nearly popping from his head.

A musty but pleasant smell filled the room, and motes of dust danced like fugitive fireflies in the soft rays of light emitted from radiant globes high above.

"This is the Scholasticate library, Grimm," the mage said in a soft voice. "Most Students only come here to retrieve a book, and then retreat to their cells or a crowded study room. You may use this library as you wish in your free time and, if you sit in one of the corner alcoves, you'll be left in peace to read to your heart's content.

"I was never much of a reader myself, but, when I wanted to be alone, I found that this was the ideal spot. It is always well lit and warm, even in the depths of the bitterest winter, which is more than can be said for a charity boy's cell. Do you like it?"

Grimm felt as if his eyes would burst from his head, and he felt himself unable to speak.

"Breathe, Grimm! You look like you were about to burst."

The boy tore his gaze away from the bookshelves and looked up at Dalquist with a beatific expression on his face.

"Oh Dalquist, the books!" he cried. "The lovely books! It's wonderful! Can I really read any of them if I want?"

Dalquist smiled. "If you want, but to be truthful, some are a little dry and others will be a little old for you. But there is a lot to read, more than a man could read in even a mage's lifetime. Would you like me to tell Doorkeeper that you will be staying here until lunch?"

Still eying the literary bounty, Grimm breathed, "Oh, yes, please, Dalquist. I do love books so."

"In that case, Grimm, I'm more than happy to do so. I'm afraid I must leave you now, as I have a few duties to perform. I promise I'll try to see how you are getting on from time to time, whenever I'm here. We charity boys should support each other."

"Thank you for spending some time with me, Dalquist." Grimm struggled to find the right words. "Thank you ever so much for showing me this lovely library. I was feeling very unhappy when you came to see me, but now I'm feeling much better. Thank you."

Dalquist nodded. "Think nothing of it. Believe me; I know only too well how difficult enjoyment can be to find at times for charity Students. Enjoy your books."

"I will, Dalquist," Grimm whispered, as the mage left the room, closing the door behind him.

When the mage had left, Grimm turned his voracious gaze to the nearest bookshelf. *Thaumaturgy and Its Application to Meteorological Phenomena* sounded intriguing, but it seemed to consist of nothing but cryptic diagrams, so he put it back on the shelf.

Meditation; the Art of Inner Calm sounded boring, as did *A First Primer of Cadences and Chants*. He picked up *The Necromantic Vocation* and leafed through it, but he soon returned it to the rack with some distaste; it seemed the book was concerned mostly with dead bodies.

The books seemed to be in no particular order that he could fathom, so he began to dart around at random.

Finally, he hit upon *Herbs and Plants; Their Attributes and Uses* and took it to a battered but comfortable leather chair near the door. Opening the book, Grimm saw a beautiful, hand-painted picture of a herb he knew well. Dock, he thought, it's good for nettle stings. Reading on, he saw that its "primary attributes" were "cool", "shady" and "watery". Then, as he read on, he saw that the "secondary attributes" were "Febrifuge", "Balm" and "Emetic".

Looking further down the page, there were further details of the kinds of magic to which the dock was "sympathetic", those to which it was "antagonistic"-which, Grimm gathered, meant unkind, although

he couldn't see how a herb could be either kind or nasty-and the "tertiary attributes", which were described by strange, angular symbols.

At the bottom of the page was the cryptic comment Suitable in all cases in the primary and secondary phases where indicated, tertiary attributes to be applied only by Healers of the Third Rank and above, on pain of undesired resonances in the infrastomal conjoinths. This meant nothing to Grimm, but the words had a certain ring of majesty about them.

As he read on, he saw many plants and herbs that he recognised and others he did not, but even the humblest weed seemed to have significance far above his imaginings and his comprehension. Grimm was still engrossed in the book when the urgent peal of a bell sounded in his head, if not in his ears. With a start, he turned to see Doorkeeper towering above him.

"It is twelve o'clock. We must go to the Refectory now, young Grimm, or you will miss your luncheon. We can't have a growing lad missing his meals." Grimm had not been aware of the passage of time, and he realised that he had spent nearly two hours absorbed in the strange book.

"I'm sorry, Doorkeeper. The book was very interesting."

Doorkeeper glanced at the title of the volume that Grimm held, and he raised his eyebrows quizzically. "Isn't that book a little old for you? Surely you don't understand it all."

Grimm shook his head. "I just like the words. I know a lot of these plants, but I never knew that there was so much to know about them.

"Groundsel's good for bad dreams," he said, eager to relate what he had learned, "and blackweed can be used for colic. Bottle-spurge can be used in the... in the second phase of... of thaumaturgic group spells of the third order, whatever that means."

Doorkeeper could not understand why anybody might read for pleasure. The last time he had read an entire book was on the day before he was finally Acclaimed as a Mage, and that was just so he could be sure of what he had to do at the ceremony. Ever since that time, he had vowed with fierce determination to avoid literature whenever he could.

Muttering to himself, "Can't be good for the eyes," he led Grimm down the worn spiral staircase and into the corridor.

Chapter 7: Long Arm of the House

Dalquist was on his way through the great hall back to his own cell to engage in some study when an insistent tickle in his forebrain told him that Lord Prelate Thorn required his presence immediately.

His heart began to beat faster. This could be what he had been waiting for! Checking his reflection in the black sheen of the magically sharp Breaking Stone, he smoothed his brown beard and ordered his hair as best he could without the aid of comb or brush. When the Prelate called, one did not dally!

With a tug at his robes, he strode resolutely towards Thorn's turret, letting his staff, Shakhmat, bob merrily at his side in a jaunty manner of its own accord. After a few moments, he remembered proper mage protocol, took tight hold of the baton and assumed a more sedate manner. He would be on his guard, too, with his language. Formal Mage Speech would be the order of the day.

The tightly winding staircase was very difficult to negotiate whilst carrying a six-foot staff, which hampered him to a considerable extent, with Shakhmat clattering on the turret's stone walls every few steps, announcing his approach. It occurred to Dalquist that this might not be coincidental. Thorn must have chosen this tower as his sanctuary for this very reason: its defensible qualities.

Drawing a deep breath in an attempt to still his pounding heart, the young Questor knocked three times on the door and waited. A laconic "Come" issued from the inner sanctum and Dalquist entered the chamber. Closing the door behind him, he took two steps forward and stood ramrod-straight before the battered oak desk, Shakhmat at half an arm's length from his right side as he had been taught.

He stared straight ahead, trying not to be distracted by the occasional pink flash from Lord Thorn's bald patch as the Prelate scanned a number of papers in what seemed almost a studied show of indifference. After several minutes, the ruddy face lifted, and the Prelate locked his powerful gaze onto Dalquist's eyes.

"Thank you for coming, Rufior. Your name is Danquest, is it not?" The Prelate's tone suggested that he did not care one way or the other.

"Dalquist, Lord Prelate." The young mage did not dare to say more.

"Ah, yes, I thought so," Thorn drawled. "I never forget a name or a face." The Prelate's gaze dared Dalquist to comment, but the Questor remained mute.

Thorn adopted an almost avuncular manner, motioning Dalquist to sit in the comfortable leather chair opposite the Prelate. The Questor sank warily into the squeaking leather, trying to make as little

commotion as possible.

Thorn put his hands together as if praying, his index fingers touching the tip of his nose, deep in momentary thought. After a few moments, he pulled a half-full bottle from a desk drawer.

"Would you care for a drink, Questor Dalquist? I have a fine brandy here."

Dalquist ached for Thorn to get to the point, but he dared not say so.

"No, thank you, Lord Prelate."

Thorn regarded with an unmistakeable look of longing at the bottle, but he replaced it in the drawer, unopened.

"A matter has been brought to my attention, Questor Dalquist; a serious matter, which greatly affects the House. I need the services of a good, loyal Questor to resolve it. Are you that mage?"

Dalquist could hardly bring the words out. "Certainly, Lord Prelate. I am honoured that you should have selected me for this role." He maintained an outward icy calm, but inside he was rejoicing. A Questor with no Quests to his name was nobody. After this, he would be able to walk with pride and look other Questors in the eye. He would also be entitled to bear the first gold ring on his staff, showing that he had undertaken a Quest for his House. He would also be on his way up the ladder to the coveted Seventh Rank.

Thorn considered further. "Could you kill a man if you had to, Questor Dalquist?"

Dalquist felt taken aback by the blunt question, but he managed a careful answer. "I find the idea distasteful, Lord Prelate, but I have been told many times that a Questor often needs to act without thinking, even if this includes killing. I am certain that I am capable of killing, if necessary, to defend myself."

Thorn managed a ghost of a smile. "What would you do if I told you that an unresisting man might need to be killed without posing a direct threat to you?"

Dalquist was a kind and considerate young man who loathed wanton cruelty, but he was not a normal man. Forged in the emotional heat and pain of a Questor's Ordeal, he had been coached, cajoled and coerced into obeying the orders of his superiors under all circumstances. The Guild and the House came first, and Thorn was the direct representative of both.

The young man was no mindless automaton, for a Mage Questor needed a quick mind and the ability to assess a situation at a moment's notice and act accordingly. Nonetheless, loyalty to the House was almost paramount among his drives. Lord Thorn would not be asking Dalquist to do this if he had not a good and pressing reason for it.

"I would not enjoy it, Lord Prelate, but I know that I could perform such an act if you required it of me in your capacities as Prelate and representative of the Guild." Only a small moue of distaste betrayed Dalquist's feelings. Thorn proffered a warm and almost amicable smile.

"It may not be necessary to do so, Dalquist. Indeed, I hope it is not; I have never developed a taste for homicide myself, but I have often had to commit it when duty demanded it. I leave the ultimate decision to you."

Dalquist looked a little discomfited, as well he might, but he had the good sense not to demur.

"However, a man needs to be removed from office and replaced by his younger brother; a man somewhat more... amenable to the House's philosophy. If the older brother will not see reason, it may be necessary to impose the ultimate sanction. However, if you can approach him closely and compel him to resign his post by the use of magic, then so much the better. One of the problems that you may have is part of the reason why I want him removed from office: he distrusts Guild Mages and does not allow us free passage through the town of Shelt, a town directly between here and High Lodge. It is irksome to have to ride around the town, and even more so to pay heavy tolls in order to ride through it. Our Lord Grall of Shelt has refused my entreaties to erect a Guild House in the town, and I feel that he will become an ever-sharper thorn in our sides as he grows in confidence. He has been almost openly flippant towards me on occasions."

Dalquist felt a shock of surprise. "Surely, Lord Prelate, this is a matter for High Lodge to resolve. The man insults the whole Guild by insulting one of its House Prelates."

Thorn leant forward, fixing Dalquist's eyes with his own, and he spoke slowly, with exaggerated clarity. "I do not want High Lodge to hear about this Quest until it is completed, Questor Dalquist. Is that clear?"

The Questor almost gulped. What Thorn was suggesting was close to a breach of Guild protocol, although Dalquist knew it was not the place of a mere tyro to say so.

"Quite clear, Lord Prelate."

"I want Grall out of office by whichever means may be necessary, and I want you to bring this about. I have told Lord Grall that I am sending a representative from the House to essay further negotiations with regard to concessions for House members. I would do the deed myself, but Grall is deeply suspicious of me."

With good reason, it would seem! Dalquist thought, suppressing a wry smile.

"Grall is surrounded by a large retinue of armed guards at all times, and so you may require a certain level of destructive magic in order to escape if you are forced to execute him.

"His brother, Burres, is the only logical choice as his successor: an ambitious young man who wants nothing more than to forge close links with the Guild and with this House in particular, since he was once a Neophyte here. He hates Grall with an abiding passion.

"However you achieve the deed, Burres wants it known throughout the town that Grall has been removed or humbled at my behest. He does not want it thought an accident. The townspeople will soon see that it is in their own best interests to recognise as a leader someone with such powerful friends, or to eschew one who has roused the ire of such people. With Grall dead or discredited, Burres is confident that he will succeed his despised brother."

Dalquist liked the sound of the Quest less with every second. Thorn made it sound so surgical and neat, but Dalquist might have to cause a great deal of destruction to prove his, or rather Burres', point, and he pointed this out to Thorn.

"That is precisely why I need a young, strong Questor, to show both Burres and the people of Shelt that we have youth and zest on our side, as well as power. We must appear as a young, virile, vigorous House."

Thorn waved his right hand in an airy manner. "Now, Questor Dalquist, I am sure that you will want to read up on the customs and geography of the area, so I will not detain you further. You are to leave for Shelt in three day's time. I have faith in you, Dalquist. See that it is not misplaced."

A dozen objections fluttered like sun-intoxicated mayflies in Dalquist's brain, but he knew that they would not sway Thorn one iota. Worse, some other Questor might be given the Quest. He bowed respectfully and left Thorn's room.

Pouring himself a large amount of brandy, Thorn knew Dalquist might face considerable danger in Shelt but, on the other hand, he would be well rewarded with gold and status. Thorn was happy that he would be able to present a full-blooded young Questor to the attention of High Lodge, and he thought of the revenues accruing to the House from all the new Students he would be receiving from the grateful or cowed people of Shelt. This, he thought, was good. It

seemed that this Questor Dalquist had been well trained. A few surreptitious Spells of Compulsion and the odd Geas or two might help, but the Prelate felt that the hunger for his first ring might prove all the encouragement the young man needed. In any case, Thorn could always claim that Dalquist had exceeded his orders if things went wrong.

Chapter 8: The Refectory

Doorkeeper chivvied Grimm along the corridor and past his cell. At the far end of the corridor was another walkway, whose entrance was almost hidden in shadow. This corridor was as dimly-lit as the first, but bright light lay at the end of it, and as they approached the exit it opened into a large, well-lit quadrangle, from which further passages led off at various angles, like the legs of some gigantic insect.

Doorkeeper stopped for a moment and spoke in the dull monotone of one reciting a speech that had been delivered many times before. "To the left, here, is where the paying Students live. That corridor just beside it leads to the study areas. The classrooms are to the right of that, and the refectory is ahead. To our immediate right is the passage to the Assembly Hall, and off to the left is the recreation area. You may enter the wealthy Students' area only when you are invited, but you may use the other areas whenever you have free time. The corridor over there leads to the West Wing, where the mages and Adepts live and study, and that is closed to all Students."

Grimm had initially thought that, when told that he would be confined to the Scholasticate, he would be incarcerated in his miserable cell, but now that he caught a glimpse of just how large the Scholasticate was he began to think that his imprisonment might not be so bad after all.

One fly in the ointment was the fact that the sound of the luncheon bell in his head was unpleasantly dissonant, and Grimm cared little for the realisation that he should hear this exquisitely irritating noise three times a day for the rest of his spell in the Scholasticate.

"If you want to explore further after luncheon, feel free to do so except where I told you not to. Now we must eat; I am absolutely famished after such a long, busy morning. We must hurry, or we will be late."

Moving straight on, they proceeded through a further quadrangle, well lit and decked with a tasteful display of large and colourful flower bowls, and Grimm saw further passages leading into the distance as they passed into the corridor directly ahead. The Scholasticate seemed even larger to the young boy than the village of Lower Frunstock where he had spent his whole life!

At the end of the corridor was a broad opening with a pair of open, metal-barred gates. Doorkeeper raised a hand and the gates swung open with a slight creak. With an expansive gesture, he led Grimm into an enormous room, bigger than any the boy had yet seen. At one end of the room was a small, cramped, terracotta-tiled section

with four long stone tables bearing dull but clean cutlery, each table with a wooden bench on either side and equipped with a wooden salt mill and a small pot of what looked like mustard.

The rest of the Refectory consisted of a much larger and more spacious area with alternating black and white marble floor tiles and tasteful murals on three walls, broken only by a large door and a hatchway, which were cunningly decorated to blend into the mahogany-panelled wall. In this area, there were neat rows of round tables with varnished and polished parquetry tops in varying sizes, ranging from small and intimate to larger tables suitable for a group of about ten persons to dine in comfort. The chairs bore faded but comfortable-looking cushions.

Each table was furnished with gleaming knives, forks and spoons in a bewildering number of varieties, a tasteful, fresh arrangement of flowers, fine linen napkins neatly folded into silver rings, delicate fingerbowls and an assortment of sauces and condiments.

Grimm did not need to ask which area was reserved for the charity Students, and he unconsciously edged towards the rude stone tables.

"This is the Refectory, Grimm," the mage said. Grimm thought this statement somewhat superfluous, but he held his tongue. "The larger area is, of course, reserved for mages and wealthy Students. I will sit with you here, in the area allocated to charity Students."

Doorkeeper spoke with an uncharacteristic, pompous air, as if bestowing a great honour. He sat on one side of one of the tables and Grimm sat opposite him.

The boy was about to ask how one obtained food in this deserted place, when the large door opened and a boy of maybe fifteen years of age emerged. He was clad in a starched white kitchen suit, and he wore a clean apron and a white cap that struggled with only partial success to retain a mass of unruly, greasy black locks. He sauntered across the floor with no apparent urgency, his head bowed.

Then, he noticed Doorkeeper and hurried across the room to arrive at the table, almost breathless. Bowing his head, he brought a card from his uniform pocket and smartly presented it to the mage. "Lord Mage, what is your pleasure?" he recited in a singsong manner, as if parroting a rote phrase.

Doorkeeper examined the card at some length, yawned and stretched luxuriantly. "I think the roast pheasant stuffed with truffles would be rather nice with wild mushrooms, new potatoes and asparagus spears."

He handed the card back to the boy, who performed an obsequious bow and made to leave. Doorkeeper caught him by the sleeve. "Where are you going, boy?" He spoke with a commanding

tone that surprised Grimm with its power. "My companion is also hungry."

The boy stammered, "But Lord Mage, he is just a charity boy, by the look. I assumed that he would be having the standard fare."

"A charity boy he is but, for today only, he dines with me as my guest."

The boy bowed clumsily, handed the menu to Grimm with a perfunctory gesture, and stood before him, arms akimbo... a picture of contempt. Grimm scanned the card with nervousness that approached panic. Turning to Doorkeeper, the boy whispered urgently in the old man's ear, "Doorkeeper, I can't read this; not any of it!"

Doorkeeper nodded, and whispered, "Goodness me; of course! I'm sorry, yes indeed. The menu is written in High Darian, which you will learn soon enough. The rich boys are taught it almost from the time they leave their mothers' knees, as soon as they learn to talk their own languages. It is the tongue of the educated, and I have been familiar with it for so long that I can't remember when I couldn't speak it. As a charity boy, you will have no menu to consult, as there is usually only a single choice."

He turned to the serving boy, who snapped smartly to a stance of attention from his earlier pose of studied, slovenly disdain.

"For my young friend," drawled the major-domo, "how does a dish of roast beef with wild leeks, yams and dumplings sound to you? Good. We'll put some flesh on those skinny bones yet, eh, Grimm?" This last was greeted by Grimm with a nervous smile as he saw the serving boy roll his eyes in a theatrical manner, his face bearing an exaggerated expression of disgust at the old man's charity.

Doorkeeper turned with surprising speed for one so old and bent, and he snapped, "I may not be a bloody Weatherworker or a Shapeshifter, but I am a mage, for all that! I'm not in my dotage yet, young man! Your name is Dortel, isn't it? Have you forgotten that mages all have ten eyes in the backs of their heads?"

"While Grimm is with me, you are to treat him with the respect due to the guest of an Acclaimed Mage, or Master Threavel, whom I seem to remember is your supervisor, will hear of my displeasure, and you won't be able to sit for a month! Is that clear to you? Or would you rather feel the sting of my Mage Staff on your backside?"

The boy swallowed, and his face paled. It was plain from his fearful expression that he knew better than to raise the ire of a Mage, even one as lowly as Doorkeeper, especially when that mage knew his identity. Grimm guessed that the serving lad knew Master Threavel's temper only too well, and that the prospect of being submitted to the chef's tender mercies scared him far more than the prospect of being walloped with a mage's Staff.

"It will... it will be as you desire, Lord Mage," the boy stammered. "I had no wish to offend either you or your guest."

As the boy scuttled off to the kitchen, Doorkeeper bellowed, "A goblet of your best Torian Red for me, and a glass of iced lemonade for my companion! You'll know that I'll know if you spit in it or otherwise spoil it, and I'll make you rue the day you were born!"

When the servant had disappeared, Grimm said, "You didn't have to do that for me, Doorkeeper, I'm sure I would have been happy with the ordinary food."

"That wasn't just for your benefit, Grimm. Certainly, I wanted you to have at least one fine meal here. You may not be lucky enough to eat as well again for a long, long time and, in truth, you are a skinny lad; but that wasn't my only reason. That little tyke thinks he's a cut above you charity boys; if there's one thing I can't abide, it's bigotry." He noted Grimm's puzzlement at the last word and added, "Snobbery, that is."

Snobbery was a concept Grimm knew well; he remembered the way rich men often looked at his grandfather when he was shoeing their horses, as if it irked them to have to come into contact with a lowly blacksmith.

The serving boy appeared after a brief interlude, an array of trays and plates balanced in an artful array across his arms. He sped to the table in a graceful glide and laid steaming meals out before Doorkeeper and Grimm, his manners and bearing impeccable. He bowed and rushed away, to return with a silver tray bearing a green bottle, a full goblet of ruby wine and a carafe of iced lemonade with slices of lemon and cracked ice floating on the top.

"That was well done, boy," said Doorkeeper. "You do have talent after all. Remember your manners and you will make more friends and fewer enemies here. You may go." He took a hearty draught from his glass.

With a respectful bow, the boy took his leave with evident relief, as a group of six brown-robed figures rushed in, just before the bell ceased its strange, inaudible tolling. There was a gaggle of boys, presumably charity Students, a tall, skinny, dark-skinned man of maybe forty, whose robes hung slack around his skeletal frame, and two older men, both of whom sported long, grey hair and white beards.

These last two must be mages, or nearly mages, Grimm thought. A long beard seemed an obligatory badge of rank, since all the mages he had met in the House wore one.

One of the grey-haired men had a mottled, discoloured face and scabbed, stained hands. His face, combined with his black, wrinkled robe made him look to Grimm like a prune with legs. The other was

ashen, bald and sunken-eyed, his face almost resembling a skull.

Doorkeeper raised his glass to the group and took another long swallow from his goblet.

"Gentlemen, won't you join us in here in the cheap seats," he crowed, "just for a change?"

The older men acquiesced with slightly nervous nods, planting themselves with evident reluctance on the stone benches. The young Students went to a corner table, their continual, impenetrable, loud babble suggesting that they were engaged in some sort of bizarre shouting competition.

"Keep it down, will you, lads? There are civilised people trying to eat in peace here, you know!"

Doorkeeper's stentorian bawl overpowered the din by a considerable margin and hurt Grimm's ears. The boyish racket diminished by the very slightest level, but did not stop.

"Only just in time, eh, Funval?" called Doorkeeper to the brown-skinned man over the boys' clamour, heedless of the fact that his voice was louder than any of theirs. It seemed as if Doorkeeper liked to unwind a little over lunch; Grimm had seen the same effect when Granfer Loras had been sampling the first cider of summer.

"Funval, allow me to introduce our newest Student, Grimm Afelnor. Grimm, this is Funval, an Adept of Herbalism. He is so dedicated to his craft that he often neglects his nutrition in the pursuit of his staff and ring. He's expected to be Acclaimed very soon, after years of diligent study and service, aren't you, Adept Funval?"

Without waiting for a reply, Doorkeeper continued. "The pale-skinned gentleman to his left is Numal, who is getting very good at Necromancy, I hear."

Grimm remembered from his earlier reading in the library that Necromancy had something to do with dead bodies, and a fugitive shiver passed through him.

"I'm sure he washed his hands before coming here, didn't you, Numal? Our spare-framed friend here is Malwarth. He is becoming a promising Adept Alchemist, yes, very good, which explains his strange complexion; the noxious substances that he plays with all day have left their indelible marks, eh, Malwarth? Each stain a badge to be worn with pride, I'll be bound."

The strange-looking Adept nodded, absently, presumably still lost in the mysteries of his craft. He sat hunched in an uncomfortable-looking cross-legged pose, his gaze distant, as if seeing beyond the walls of the Refectory to some far-off place.

Doorkeeper took a wolfing bite of his meal, and Grimm remembered that he, too, had food in front of him. The dish looked delicious, and he took a hearty portion from his own plate, aware of

the envious looks that some of the younger Students cast his way.

"Eat up, Grimm" carolled the old mage, "you won't be getting meals like this every day, I'm afraid.

"Ah, gentlemen, here comes the waiter to take your order."

Doorkeeper bent back to his meal, as did Grimm. Although Grimm found Doorkeeper a likeable old man, he found it was nice to have a momentary respite from the mage's ebullient banter, even more so than when he was trying to play the stern, erudite mage.

It appeared that the waiter, Dortel, had heeded Doorkeeper's advice. He brought the Adepts' meals with a cheery smile, and he served the yammering Students their more basic sustenance without insult, to be rewarded with polite thanks from a few of the boys before they launched into their meals with ferocious gusto. It seemed that food, at least, could still the Students' voices, even if only for a short while.

The rest of the meal passed in relative peace, apart from slight snuffling noises as Doorkeeper wolfed down his fare; the three Adepts picked at theirs like birds. The mage released a mighty eructation, scratched his armpits and leant back for a moment in his chair.

"Ah well, brothers, I regret that I have a lot to do for this evening. I must be word-perfect with my speech for the gala tonight, and I haven't finished it yet. So much to do for a busy mage, so much work..."

Doorkeeper carried on for a while about his vital and onerous duties, but, eventually, even he wound down. "I'm sure that you'll look after Grimm, eh, gentlemen?" The prune and the skeleton gave swift, nervous nods, further enhancing the impression Grimm had of them as exotic birds.

Doorkeeper levered himself to his feet with his old staff and walked away. Grimm liked Doorkeeper a lot, but he felt a general release of tension as the old man left the Refectory, flinging his arms wide in a theatrical gesture to open the doors and letting them slam with a boom behind him.

Chapter 9: Strange Characters

After a long pause, the pale Necromancer, Numal, winked at Grimm, causing the boy to give an involuntary start.

"Suddenly quiet, isn't it, Grimm?" he said in a pleasant voice at odds with his fearsome appearance. "We all love Doorkeeper, but he can be a bit too much sometimes."

The Necromancer might have an austere aspect, but Grimm sensed the genuine warmth and humour in his words. Smiling, he replied, "Well, maybe sometimes Doorkeeper does talk rather a lot."

Numal moved close to the boy. "You're scared of me because of my calling, eh, boy?" Grimm, stammering, tried to deny this, but he dissembled poorly. "Well, don't worry, Grimm; I am still a human being, for all that. I do spend my days in the dark, reading signs from rabbits' entrails and bleached bones, but only because I have to. Necromancy may be my vocation, but it is not one that I ever sought."

Numal's voice became wistful and dreamy as he continued. "Once, I had dreams of being a bold Questor, making my own way in the world, or a mighty Weatherworker, who could make the sky tremble my passing, but it was never to be so. Such, I suppose, is life. I did not ask to become a Necromancer; the calling was decreed for me by the Magemasters. Nonetheless, their wisdom is evident. 'The road was not chosen for me; it has chosen me'; that, by the way, is just one of the many sayings that the Magemasters will throw at you over the years.

"Some of the mysteries of the craft are now becoming clear to me and, although the subject is distasteful to many, I now see that, if I am to be a Mage at all, it is to be as a Necromancer. The Magemasters are quick to assay a Student's worth and capabilities, and they are fine judges indeed. For too long, I thought myself worthless and without vocation, but now I may find my true potential in the calling chosen for me."

The mottled, multicoloured Malwarth leaned close, wafting strange, yet not unpleasant chemical odours in Grimm's direction. "For me, the years in the Scholasticate have flown past like dreams.

"It has been hard work, but when I strike my Staff, crafted by my own hands, on the Breaking Stone and it rebounds, I will know that it was all worthwhile. Every day I spend with my books, my potions and my carving brings that day closer."

The brown-skinned Herbalist, Funval, grimaced, looking at the other Adepts with an expression of doubt at their fine words. "As far as my parents were concerned, it was either to be magic or the navy for me. They tossed a coin, one of the few they had, and decided on this place. An uncle of mine used to be a Second Rank Reader here,

and so I was in.

"I would far rather have spent my days in the sun and the wind as a sailor, seeing the world and its wonders, but I ended up as a Student for seven years and a Neophyte Herbalist for seventeen more. I've been slogging away as an Adept for five years now, and all I can say is that at least the food and the beds are better. What do you think of the Scholasticate, then, youngster?"

Grimm thought for a while; the Adepts' flowery speech had rather taken him aback. "It's bigger than I thought, sir," he hazarded. "I just thought there would be more people here."

Enthused by Funval's openness, Malwarth, the Alchemist nodded. "Neophytes and Adepts, unlike Students, do not always have to eat at fixed times, to avoid distraction," he said, "and the average Adept spends every waking moment polishing up his spells or working on his Staff. I only came here because I'm getting sick of having my best conversations with a lump of wood. I live with it, I sleep with it, and I dream of the bloody thing."

This meant nothing to the boy, but he remained silent.

"I meant what I said about how it will all be worth it on the day of my Acclamation, but dedicated as I am, even I need a break now and again," the Alchemist declared.

Numal sighed. "Well, now that you come to mention it, Malwarth, it does get tedious at times. I always wanted to be a singer, a dancer or some other kind of entertainer. In my youth, I was told that my imitation of Daffo the Clown was highly amusing."

Grimm's mind performed acrobatics, much in the manner of the famous Daffo, as he was assailed by the ludicrous image of the stern, pale Necromancer as a clown with brightly-coloured motley, a green wig and a painted smile. He struggled to resist a strong urge to burst into a fit of hysterical giggling. Just as he feared he might be about to explode with the effort, he was saved by the inaudible, yet persistent Refectory bell.

Funval, Numal and Malwarth made their excuses; each had much work to complete before the start of the Scholasticate year. The members of what Grimm thought of as the Student Shouting Team rose as one and trooped out of the doors; the Refectory was again quiet, and the boy was alone.

In the sudden, stark silence, Grimm felt quite lost, and he trudged back to his cell with a sullen gait. With nothing else to do, he picked up his solitary book and began to read again. Doorkeeper had told him that the Rules were important, and he was determined not to fall foul of some stern-faced Magemaster.

By the time he had reached Rule 4.23.6, 'On the third day of every second month, each Student shall wear on his left breast a red

ribbon in honour of Tharmal the Wise, Third Prelate of the House', his eyes had begun to glaze over. He was about to head again for the Library when there was a soft tap at the door. It was Dalquist, and Grimm was happy to see him: anything to distract him from the Rules!

"Dalquist, thank you for coming to see me again!" he crowed.

Dalquist beamed. "Grimm, I have my first Quest!" he cried. "I wanted you to be the first to know. I leave in three days."

"How long will you be gone?" Grimm asked, his eyes wide and almost frightened.

"I'm afraid I don't know. I will come back to see you when I can, I promise."

Grimm opened his mouth to speak, and the Questor raised his hand. "I can't tell you anything about the Quest, so please don't ask me, Grimm."

The boy did want to know about the Quest; the Book of Rules and Regulations had given brief accounts of the achievements of a notable Questor or two, and yet Grimm had no idea what they actually did.

Instead, he asked, "Are you looking forward to it?"

Dalquist rubbed his chin as if his brown beard had begun to itch, and he lowered himself onto the chair by Grimm's bed. "I want to do it because, for the first time, I will be doing a service for my House and my Prelate, instead of taking from it.

"On the other hand, I am prepared to admit that the Quest is not what I would have chosen for myself," he sighed, evidently somewhat uneasy, "but it is not for a mage to question his superiors. And it will make a true Questor of me at last.

"Part of me burns with eagerness to go, another is anxious in case I fail, and a third is scared witless at the prospect of going outside. I haven't seen anything except this House for eighteen years. And there will be women! They intrigue me and faceless temptresses sometimes trouble my dreams, but I know nothing about them except what I could learn from anatomy books."

The distaff sex was, of course, just as much a mystery to the seven-year-old Grimm, but it seemed strange to live in an environment with no women or girls. "Are there no girl Students or mages here, Dalquist?" he asked, although the prospect of the absence of females did not bother him too much.

"That's out of the question, Grimm." Dalquist looked uncomfortable, but he carried on. "One thing you will be taught later is that... shall we say, very close relationships with women are forbidden to Guild mages. They say that one kiss dulls the mind and... and anything more serious destroys a mage's power. I very much want to have a family some day, but I cannot until I have paid off my debt. A married mage is an ex-mage, although he can still remain a full

Guild member if he so wishes.

"The Guild allows no female incumbents because of the risk of... dalliances amongst the older Students."

Grimm frowned. "What's a dalliance, Dalquist?"

"Well... it's a... it's a special kind of friendship, Grimm. Can we just leave it at that?"

Grimm did not know why Dalquist had become tongue-tied, but he decided not to press the matter. He nodded, despite being none the wiser.

Chapter 10: Magemaster Crohn

Over the next two weeks, Grimm explored every corner of the Scholasticate open to him, until it seemed as if he had spent his whole life there.

He flitted like the shade of a brown mouse through the corridors of the Scholasticate, familiarising himself with its myriad complexities.

Often, he secluded himself in some dusty yet comfortable nook of the Library, finding its marvels inexhaustible. On a few occasions, he played and tussled with some of the older charity Students, but at the age of seven, an age gap of a year or two was a vast chasm. He needed some friends of his own age.

At last, his homesickness began to fade, and he began to think of the Scholasticate as his new home, although he often thought of his grandparents and the smithy in which he had been raised.

Dalquist returned from his Quest a changed man. He carried himself with greater confidence, but he was quieter and reticent to talk about his adventure. His earlier good nature was still apparent, but, from time to time, a dark expression would flash across his face for no clear reason.

Dalquist told Grimm that he would soon be his old self again, but he wished to be alone for a while.

To a small boy, a fortnight can seem like an eternity, but it passed, nonetheless.

On the first day of his magical education, Grimm's solitude was shattered as he moved uneasily through the Scholasticate assembly hall amongst a vast multitude of Students.

The imposing, walnut-panelled hall was enormous, yet it barely seemed able to contain the milling throng of Students, Neophytes, Adepts and mages.

An imposing stage was at one end of the hall, but the Students seemed to know better than to encroach upon it.

Grimm felt like a ship in a stormy sea as he was buffeted through the crowd of chattering, shouting boys. Most of them had a confident air and wore expensive clothes; many had obviously met others of the throng before, and they talked in loud voices of earlier schools and

good times so that Grimm felt quite adrift, dizzy and claustrophobic. He had never been comfortable with crowds, and he had never encountered such a horde of people in his life.

He wandered aimlessly around small knots of oblivious boys until his sleeve was tugged by an earnest, energetic lad. The boisterous student wore fine, colourful clothes of blue and red, and an unruly mop of red hair threatened to swamp a pale, freckled face as he was jostled from time by the restless throng.

"You new?" the boy shouted. "Me, too. What's the matter?"

Grimm gesticulated towards the other boys and shrilled, "I don't know anybody here."

"Oh, you don't want to take any notice of this stuck-up lot," yelled the redhead. "I'm called Madar, by the way."

"I'm Grimm Afelnor. I do feel a bit lost. I've never seen so many noisy boys in one place before."

"Oh, they're big-mouths for sure. I've been in Lower School with a lot of these before. Where did you go to school?"

"My gramma taught me at home in Lower Frunstock. She's a teacher." He felt rather small at this admission of lowly birth, eyeing the expensive satin robes that Madar wore with such panache.

Madar snorted. "You're lucky. I hardly ever got to see my family at all. As soon as my Da got rich, he got a bunch of nannies to look after me. I got rid of most of them easy. A frog in their bed, a paint-pot over the door, a spider in their tea; they just screamed and ran out the door. It didn't do any good because Da always got someone else. Usually it was somebody with a harder hand." He put on a mournful expression for Grimm's benefit at this tale of heroic defiance in the face of unbending authority, but Grimm could tell that the outwardly confident Madar was, in reality, as nervous as he.

A loud gong sounded from the stage, and the babble of voices stilled in an instant. Grimm and Madar turned to see an imposing grey-haired figure in white silk robes standing on the dais with a confident air of magisterial authority, his tall mage's staff at his side.

"I bid you welcome to another year in Arnor House Scholasticate," the tall man boomed, every inch the image of a mage.

"For the benefit of those of you who have just joined us, I am Urel Shelit, Mage Illusionist of the Seventh Rank, called the Dream-weaver, Senior Magemaster of the Scholasticate.

"All of those names refer to me. You will find a lot of mages here with many names and titles, many of them among the ranks of our estimable Magemasters. Despite the panoply of appellations, they are still human beings, and you can take your troubles to them. Just be sure that you have genuine problems before you complain; do not bother them with idle chit-chat, at your peril!

"All of you are here for a minimum of seven years; charity pupils for as long as twenty-two. I know that seems a mighty gulf of time, but I can assure you that you will find your time so full that the years will seem to fly past.

"I spent seven years here as a Student, nine as a Neophyte and thirty-five as an Adept before I was finally elevated to the First Rank of my calling; it was the proudest day of my life.

"If you work hard and persevere, you may one day feel the same joy and the warm embrace of an ancient and mighty brotherhood that I felt on that day, so long ago. I bid you welcome to this House, and I wish you success and happiness here.

"To the older hands here: welcome back. This new scholastic year will bring new challenges, new opportunities and new responsibilities. Work hard and make us proud, as you have done before."

Urel's speech went on for nearly three hours, including references to each section of the crowd, which showed that the Senior Magemaster was someone who cared deeply for his charges, and who took deep interest in the day-to-day events in the Scholasticate; he was evidently also a man with a keen eye who missed little. Grimm might have appreciated the speech more had his legs not begun to develop a fierce ache, and had he understood more of what the mage was saying.

At the end of the speech, Senior Magemaster Urel received a raucous but good-natured accolade from the older Students and Neophytes, steering a close, careful course around the border of the onerous House rules on comportment. The mages and Adepts confined themselves to respectful applause, which was almost drowned in the noise.

As Urel finished his speech and departed, the loud hubbub started again. Doorkeeper, who had been standing by the hall door for the whole performance, clapped his leathery hands and rapped the base of his staff on the wooden floor of the hall. He pulled back his shoulders and, with some effort, managed to stand fully erect. This added six inches to his height, and Grimm realised that the ancient mage was even taller than he thought.

"Come on, boys, stand still. Get into line, do: you know the routine. Chop, chop," he cried. Doorkeeper's booming voice carried through the hall with ease, but to little immediate effect. Some Students stopped talking, others carried on chatting to their friends, but, at last, all moved into slack, ragged lines and the volume of chatter decreased a little.

Having failed almost completely to cow the throng of boys before him, Doorkeeper slumped into his familiar, hunched pose, opening a door at his right side.

"Class Wyvern!" he cried. "This is your classroom for the year. Wait here quietly until Magemaster Tarvel arrives." About forty boys came to the fore, and, for the most part, they filed into the room in a more or less orderly fashion.

The hall was like the hub of a wheel, with twelve classrooms arrayed around it like spokes. The hubbub in the hall began to lessen as more boys were ushered into their appointed places of learning.

The new Students were left until last, and Doorkeeper motioned the thirty remaining boys towards a door on the far side of the hall. The boys trooped inside, nervous and mute, and Grimm was carried along by the stream of Students.

The room was painted in a mixture of dun and bile-green. The furniture consisted of long ink-stained benches, all battered and well-worn, set in five rows, behind which were arrayed hard, wooden trestles.

Grimm saw that many boys had brought silk or velvet cushions in apparent anticipation of the uncomfortable seating arrangements.

Instead of the more usual elementary school charts showing lists of words and numbers, three walls were covered by a mural consisting of strange symbols. There were no paintings or essays pinned to the walls.

Since most of the boys had taken positions next to their particular friends, Grimm sat at the back of the lower schoolroom, resisting the urge to chew his fingernails in his nervousness.

All of the other boys in the room had accents and clothes that spoke of wealthy upbringing, which made Grimm all too conscious of his simple woollen robes. Small groups of boys engaged in desultory conversation. Few spared the plainly-attired Grimm the least glance, except for Madar, sitting at the front, who gave Grimm a friendly smile and a wave, which Grimm returned.

The door opened, and the chattering diminished by a considerable amount, as a tall man strode in to stand before the class. He wore green silk robes with a voluminous hood, and he carried a gnarled, brass-shod staff as tall as he, with seven gold rings at its upper end.

The man had steel-blue eyes, and his thick white beard reached the middle of his chest. To Grimm, he looked the very archetype of wizardry, and the very force of his presence cowed most of the boys. This was a mighty magic user, and no error!

The man beat his heavy staff on the floor thrice to attract the boys' attention. The last few chatterers abruptly fell silent, and the majestic mage cleared his throat.

"I am Crohn Bowe, called the Mindstealer," he intoned in a powerful, rumbling, bass voice that made Grimm want to clear his

own throat. "I am your Magemaster, and that means that I have the ultimate responsibility for your tuition in this House. If you have any insurmountable problems, bring them to me and I will attempt to resolve them as well as I can. Just make sure that you do not bring me every trifling little issue and triviality, or we may well fall out." The blue eyes scanned the room, inviting challenge; none came.

"For whatever reasons, you have been sent here to follow the difficult path to mastery, and I am to try to lead you there. For now, I will be teaching you Perception, Interpretation, and Visualisation. They may not be particularly interesting subjects, but none of you will progress to a higher level until he has mastered each of them to my satisfaction and mine alone.

"Some of you are related to members of this House, or may have some small awakening of power, and you may believe that this gives you some kind of precedence or advantage over others. Correct this impression at once! Here, what you were is forgotten and of no consequence. You are all ignorant, a state that I intend to correct."

Crohn paused for effect, letting the words sink into the young minds. He was a potent mage, but he had found that his true vocation came in the education of the young and impressionable.

"A mage is not some simpleton, bumbling in the dark, or a blind scatterer of raw power," he boomed, "but one who understands the meaning and practice of his craft, who can use this to control the powers within him, and who can direct those powers to a desired end. It matters little if you have enough power to shame the mightiest Weatherworker in the land if that power cannot be marshalled, controlled, directed and understood. I may have no more innate power than do many of you, but I am confident and controlled in the use of that power, and I am fully aware of my limitations. Even moderate power can be used to great effect when allied to mastery of the craft."

Crohn smoothed out imaginary wrinkles in his pristine robes. "One thing I cannot do," he said, "is to increase your level of magical power or intelligence. All I or any Magemaster can do is to lead or draw out the power and intelligence already present within you. This is actually the root meaning of the word 'education'."

Fishing a small piece of chalk from a pocket, Crohn wrote the words 'EDUCATION: drawing out' on the blackboard, underlining the phrase twice, his robes fluttering around him like birds' wings. Cowed by his commanding presence, the boys were transfixed by his earnest intensity; or so Crohn hoped.

"If you have no power, you will never be a mage, no matter how diligently you may study. If you have power and cannot, or will not, learn to direct it, you will never be a mage. If you fail to persevere, or

do not heed what you are taught, you will never be a mage."

Crohn loved the rapt attention of the boys. There might be no love or admiration in their eyes, but he knew that he was where he had always been destined to be.

He cleared his throat. "Only if you have both power and control in full measure," he said, "and only if you exercise true diligence and industry in the understanding of your chosen craft, will you be acclaimed a master.

"I can put your minds at rest on one score: all of you have been accepted as Students only because you have been interviewed by a member of the Guild and are known to have some degree of magical power. Maybe two-thirds of this class will leave the Scholasticate with some small competence in the Art, but without being judged fit to wear the Guild Ring.

"Of the remaining ten boys, perhaps five will show the strength and determination to progress to eventual Acclamation. For every ten such dedicated Students, it is expected that seven will become either Readers or Scholars, the backbone of the Guild's magical capability.

"Out of sixty Students, it is expected that three-one-twentieth-will become what we call Specialists; true masters of the Craft of Thaumaturgy."

Crohn let this last sink in. Nobody was guaranteed mastery, whatever his inheritance or his breeding.

"Know and understand that I will be proud of each and every Student, no matter his achievements, should I know that he has worked to achieve his full potential. You will only learn to fulfil yourself if you dedicate yourselves to your studies. If you apply yourselves and master what you have as best you are able, I will be happy to acknowledge you as brothers."

Crohn scanned the group, but he was pleased to see no hint of mockery or dissension. "Until then, you are merely Students, here to learn what few inklings you may of an abstruse and arcane art.

"Whatever you have been taught until this point in time is irrelevant. Here begins your magical education. Attend well."

Chapter 11: First Class

The Magemaster scanned the class with a slightly disapproving eye, as if expecting misbehaviour, but the Students were still displaying a reasonable amount of attention, so he continued.

"What, then, is magic? It is the controlled extension of one's will and power to effect a change in what is. In some measure, this is no different to the act of picking up a book."

To illustrate his concepts, Crohn picked a book from his table and held it aloft.

"Consider the actions that need to take place in order for me to do something as simple as lifting a book," he said, warming to his theme. "I see the object, I form the desire to lift it, and I direct my will to it. My will is conveyed to the object by my arm and my hand. These are given power from the air I breathe and the food I eat.

"I can lift the book only when all these factors are present. If I lift too strongly, the book flies into the air. If my grip is too tight, I crush it. If my grip is too weak, it slips through my fingers. My senses need to inform me of the success or failure of the action so that I can learn from the experience."

A boy at the back raised his hand and Crohn motioned him to speak. "Lord Mage, your will doesn't lift the object, does it? Your hand does."

Crohn suppressed a smile; he knew such a question would be raised at some point, and he was ready for it. "If I were to sever my hand and cast it from me, could it still lift? What does my hand know of the book? Without my will to direct it, it is no more than a piece of meat on a butcher's slab."

Perhaps encouraged by the other boy's bold example, a serious-looking charity Student at the back of the room and raised his hand, and Crohn acknowledged him with a nod. "Lord Mage," the boy said, "you said that it was important to see the object so you could lift it. But blind people can still lift things. I don't think I know what you mean."

"Indeed, I know several blind mages who are easily as powerful and skilful as I am, if not more so," the Magemaster replied. "As you will all soon appreciate, 'sight' is merely a metaphor for 'perception', acquisition of data by means of a physical sense. It is necessary to perceive an object in some sensory manner in order to interact with it in a controlled and meaningful way.

"Magic is the same, in all the important respects. The desired change must be perceived in terms of magic, the spell necessary to reflect the desired change must be held in the mind, and the magical

power patterned by the spell must be sent forth to carry out the desired action. Is that clear?"

A chorus of "Yes, Lord Mage" arose from the room, and Crohn saw no dissenting faces. He knew that most of the boys still would not understand the full import of what he had said, but their mere acquiescence would be enough for now.

"We shall concentrate initially on what I have called 'sight', since this seems to confuse at least some of you if not, as I suspect, most of you. That is, 'how to see without eyes'. One cornerstone of the practice of magic is what we call 'Mage Sight'; the ability to perceive magic and magical items. One or two of you may already have a rudimentary form of this, in which case your task will be easier. Can any of you see the colours that pervade a human soul?"

Three hands were raised, and Crohn nodded to a serious-looking boy with dark eyes. "What is your name, boy?"

"Grimm Afelnor, Lord Mage." Crohn started briefly at the name and was about to comment on it, but he remembered the briefing given him by Urel; no member of his staff was to comment on the Afelnor boy's antecedents.

"Well, Afelnor," he said, "perhaps you would like to come here and tell the other Students of the phenomenon, and how it may be observed."

Looking nervous now at having been singled out for attention, Grimm rose to his feet and moved to stand beside Magemaster Crohn.

"Well, it's like you let everything go black and then the colours stand out," he began. "It's like when you let your eyes go blurry and little lights swell up big like sequins, but it's not really in your eyes except that's where you see it. I know how to do it, but I can't really say how. I guess it's a bit like swallowing. I've always known how to do it, but I can't explain it to anybody else."

Crohn was not quite convinced that Grimm understood the niceties of the Sight, although he had given a reasonable description of the phenomenon. Perhaps a practical demonstration might be necessary. "Afelnor, tell me about my colours, my aura."

Trembling just a little, Grimm faced the Magemaster and squinted. "There are the gold lines that I think mean you're a wizard... a mage, that is," he corrected himself. "They're neat and straight. There's some light green, which I think means you don't like to give up, and orange spots. I know they mean you can get a bit angry sometimes, but they're wrapped in clouds of blue, which is a nice, friendly colour."

Crohn was impressed; it seemed that the boy knew more than a little about the skill. He was about to dismiss the Student when Afelnor continued.

"Right now, you have a lot of grey," he said, still squinting, "which means you're worried, but it's got all bits of white in it, which I think means you're hiding it. And now there's some yellow, which means you're a bit embarrassed 'cause you didn't believe me when I said I could see your colours..."

Grimm stopped, clapping a hand over his mouth; his own aura was now awash with shades of yellow and grey.

"Very well, Afelnor," grunted Crohn, unhappy that his barrier of emotionless impassivity had been breached.

"You have the basis of Mage Sight. You will find that it is polite to keep silent about much of what you see in future, and you should never again do this unless given permission; to inspect another Guildbrother's aura without invitation is considered the height of bad manners."

Grimm's cheeks became flushed, and he lowered his eyes in obvious embarrassment.

"However, since I instructed you to demonstrate your control of the Sight, you are guilty of nothing more than a lack of tact, which is not a punishable offence, unless I suspect it is deliberate."

Crohn waited for a few moments to let the lesson sink in and then continued, "Now, Afelnor; with the word 'tact' in mind, be so kind as to inform the class what you can divine concerning my Mage Staff."

"I've never tried to see the colours for things, Lord Mage... but I can see something... it's a funny sort of colour. It glows... like a sort of... of reddish-grey-purple. I can't explain it. I've never seen the colour before, but it shifts and changes all the time, faster than it does with people."

"That is what magic looks like, Afelnor," said Crohn, impressed with the boy's level of understanding. "The swirl and play of the colours are important. They can tell a mage about what the magic can do. One of the most important applications of Mage Sight is in the identification of magic, and it will be some time before you have the ability to apply this knowledge. But you have a good start here. You may be seated."

Looking relieved, Grimm sat back down, but Crohn did not fail to notice looks of spite from some of the other boys.

For the rest of the lesson, Crohn taught the Students exercises to bring forth the Sight and by the end of the morning, eight of them

were able to see auras, if only in a dim and haphazard manner. This gave Grimm a little reassurance after his earlier gaffe.

"We will revisit the subject of Mage Sight later," Crohn said. "I must now tell you something of the structure of the Scholasticate.

"You come here as Students, as I did many years ago. If you work well and diligently, you will become Neophytes within a period of seven years or, on occasions, less. By that time, we should have learned enough about you to understand in which field your magical vocation may lie.

"At that point, the paying Students among you may elect to leave the Scholasticate, with only the merest glimmering of what it means to pursue a life as a true mage. I hope you will not do so."

Crohn's eyes seemed to burn, and Grimm's attention was drawn to them. From the utter silence that filled the room, he guessed that every boy in the room was as rapt as he.

"Those of you who choose to build on your education will begin to be introduced to the actual practice of the arcane arts," the Magemaster boomed. "Should you prove equal to the requirements of your magical calling, you will be declared an Adept. An Adept is a mage-in-waiting. Your main task as an Adept is to refine and practice what you have learned, and to begin work on your Staff.

"The Mage Staff is the true token of the mage, unbreakable, immutable and proof of your deep understanding and control of your chosen craft. A mage puts part of his soul into creation of his Staff, and it is a bonded part of him from that time on.

"When your Magemaster agrees that your Staff is ready, you will be called upon to take it to the Breaking Stone in the Main Hall and strike it against the stone thrice with all your might. If it remains unbroken, you will be Acclaimed as a full and true Guild Mage. This is a prize beyond compare, although regrettably few persevere until this point. Perseverance is the key. Are there any questions?"

A stout boy near the front of the class stood up. "Lord Mage, I've heard that there are lots of different kinds of wizard-I mean, mage. Can you tell us what they are?"

Crohn nodded in acknowledgement of the question. "Firstly, I will say that there is far more to being a mage than carrying a staff and bearing a ring," he said. "A saying that you will hear many times is that 'power and presence complete the mage'. You will never bear the ring until you are cultured and educated people, in your bearing and in your speech. A true mage bears himself with true gravity, a presence that is beyond the norm. You may think that all Magemasters are pompous windbags-" Crohn paused to let the laughter die away. "-but the formal manner in which you hear me speak-that which we call 'Mage Speech'-is but one of the tokens of a master.

"From this moment, you are not to use street vernacular such as contractions in class. That means that you will say 'it is' instead of 'it's', 'cannot' instead of 'can't' and 'would not' in place of 'wouldn't'.

"I also wish to point out that to ask me a question beginning: 'Can you tell us...?' is asking if I am able to tell you, to which the only reasonable responses would be 'yes' or 'no'. The correct and polite way to commence such a request should be something like: 'Would you please tell us?' With this in mind, please rephrase your question."

From the Student's fine clothes, Grimm guessed that he was well-educated, and that he had only forgotten what he had already been taught.

The boy nodded, cleared his throat and said, "Please, Lord Mage, will you be kind and tell us which types of mage there are in the Guild?"

Crohn suppressed a smile. "Near enough, boy-Shule, is it?"

"Yes, Lord Mage. Angor Shule."

"Well, Shule, there are many different kinds of mage within the Guild. From time to time, new names are thought up by High Lodge for mages who do not fit the standard moulds. I will not tell you details of each kind of mage at this time, for our time is limited, but some of the mage categories of which I am aware are Scholar, Reader, Necromancer, Manipulator, Weatherworker, Illusionist, Shapeshifter, Questor, Healer, Summoner, Dominator... there are several others, but I suspect that this list will suffice for the moment.

"I am a Mage Manipulator, a mage who changes the physical form of objects. Senior Magemaster Urel, who has charge of the Scholasticate of which you are all fortunate to be Students, is an Illusionist, a mage who can place images, glamours and sensory impressions into an impressionable mind.

"The types of mage have an order of precedence, of which you will be taught more in good time. Suffice it to say that Mage Questor, Mage Weatherworker and Mage Shapeshifter are the vocations most highly regarded by High Lodge and by magic-users in general. The reason that they are so highly esteemed is that they are very rare indeed.

"I know that many of you have fathers or relatives who are Guild Mages of one of these rare types. As I have said, you may therefore imagine that this will guarantee you the same talents. I regret to say that, whilst genetic inheritance is a factor in determining whether or not a child has magical power, it does not determine his eventual calling.

"Granted, a powerful mage is likely to have a powerful son. Yet power alone does not make a mage. Dedication, talent and firm, constant self-control are essential factors. Such traits rarely run

entirely true in families. My father was a Seventh Rank Weatherworker, as was my grandfather.

"Father brought me up from an early age to use and analyse the Sight, and I was taught how to read runes before I fully learned my native tongue. By the time I reached your age and started out here at the Scholasticate, I had what amounted perhaps to a three-year advantage over most of the other boys. Nobody was more surprised than I was when, as a Neophyte, my Magemaster told me that my vocation was to be as a Manipulator. This is a relatively highly regarded profession, but I had been so sure that I would be a Weatherworker like my father and his father before him."

Crohn seemed to be on a familiar home stretch now, and his oratory picked up in pace and intensity.

"Nevertheless, I swallowed my disappointment and applied myself assiduously to learn the craft of the Manipulator until I was finally Acclaimed. My father was present at my Acclamation, and he was just happy that I had managed to become any sort of mage.

"The talents and abilities of mages of the various different classes will be outlined in greater detail later on in your schooling. However, I would like to say a few words about the undervalued calling of Mage Reader. Although this magical vocation is common and, hence, not held in high regard by ignorant people, there is no shame in this calling. Good Mage Readers are valued and important members of the Guild, but they can be hard to find.

"Very few Students, knowing the lowly status that the discipline entails, choose to further their education here when they are informed as Neophytes that their vocation will be as a Reader. This is a mistake. A good Reader is an essential member of all Great Spells, spells involving large groups of mages. All Readers bear a House Ring identical to the one I have worn for many years now,"-he held up his left hand to display a beautiful blue-and-gold ring, and a few boys, including Grimm, gaped in mute appreciation-"the same ring that you may one day bear, if you are diligent in your studies.

"Every Reader carries a staff scarcely distinguishable from my own, a staff crafted by his own hand, and good Readers are in some demand at High Lodge. A High Lodge Mage Reader is a mage of some distinction."

Crohn gave a stern look. "I trust that none of you will turn his nose up if offered a vocation as Reader," he said, his brows lowered. No dissenting voice came.

"As well as a hierarchy of vocations," he continued, "all the classes of magery have a number of grades within them, the highest being the Seventh Rank. As you can tell from the gold rings on my staff, I am a Mage Manipulator of the Seventh Rank. Our respected Prelate, Lord

Thorn, is a Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank. Any mage of the Fifth Rank or above may teach in the Scholasticate, and any mage of the Seventh Rank may be declared a Magemaster, one who teaches and also acts as, I trust, a spiritual guide. At this stage in your education, this is all that you need to know. As Students, all that you really need to know is how to study, how to appreciate the value of your learning, and how to apply yourselves to the importance of the craft to which you have been submitted."

The distant, strident bell of the Refectory sounded, indicating the mid-day meal break, and Crohn motioned the new Students to leave the classroom. They filed out in seeming stupor, and the Magemaster maintained his stiff, formal pose. When they had left, he allowed a broad smile to suffuse his face: the morning had gone well.

Chapter 12: Kargan

The new Students were dismissed to the Refectory for the mid-day meal, and some of the other boys sat with Grimm to ask him more about these mysterious colours and what they meant. He was more than happy to tell them what he knew about the skill, but the boys drifted away after he had told them what they wanted to know. He looked about for Madar, the friendly boy he had met in the hall, but Madar was earnestly, confidently holding court at the far end of the Refectory. A large group of other young Students seemed quite engrossed in whatever it was that Madar was saying.

Knowing he was forbidden to sit in the hallowed area reserved for the rich Students, Grimm worked his way through an insipid meal of broad beans and mutton in silence, ignored by the other Students at his end of the Refectory.

In the afternoon, the boys were faced with the dynamic, enthusiastic figure of Magemaster Kargan, a welcome change from the forbidding Crohn, with a shock of grey hair, a neat goatee of the same colour and blue-tinted spectacles that gave him an indefinable air of mystery. Despite the colour of his hair and beard, Kargan's unlined face and broad, toothy smile looked as if they belonged on a much younger man.

Where Crohn had announced the beginning of his lecture by banging his staff on the stone floor, Kargan began by ostentatiously slamming a pile of books onto the front desk with an impressive thump that made even the most torpid boy jerk into an upright position.

Leaning forward on the balls of his feet, he spoke in a conspiratorial stage whisper.

"You may have heard rumours that I am slightly unhinged," he began. "Those rumours may well be true." The beaming, somewhat manic expression on his face did not contradict this statement.

"Greetings, Students," he cried in a loud but singsong voice. "I am Kargan Lindata." He paused to scribble his name on the slate board, "and for my pains it has fallen to my lot to try to teach you talentless ingrates something of Runes, Spell Reading and Recital."

Kargan drew a deep breath and continued in a quieter tone.

"No doubt," he said, "Magemaster Crohn has told you much of our noble calling but, in my experience, most of the pampered pets that come here merely hope to learn a few impressive tricks. Whether you learn or not is nothing to me; I have seen many a moneyed dilettante pass through these halls and I am not one who lusts for a magely Acclamation; I have held this staff for over twenty years, and I could not care less if you fritter your whole time away until you become bored and leave.

"Nonetheless, I have to try to cram some of my hard earned knowledge into those thick pates of yours until something sticks."

The booming voice dropped again to a low level, a parody of a tragedian's soliloquy.

"I have studied and struggled for fifty-eight long years, only to come to this lot of ingrates," he said, adding a theatrical sigh and slapping a hand to his brow. "Nobody appreciates my vast talents." Some of the boys smiled, Grimm among them, recognising the new Magemaster's dry humour.

"RUNES!" Kargan shrieked in a mighty voice which made the boys sit bolt upright again. "RUNES ARE THE LANGUAGE OF MAGICAL LORE!"

Some of the Students regarded the Magemaster with wide, fearful eyes after this thundering declamation, but Grimm could recognise play-acting when he saw it; he guessed that Kargan was not in truth the fire-breathing maniac he appeared.

The young Student found Kargan's style of education more entertaining, at least, than that of Magemaster Crohn, not least because Kargan did not seem to share Crohn's scruples with regard to the use of 'Mage Speech'.

"Don't listen to what the other Magemasters may tell you about how important this facet of lore is, or how central that principle is. This is the most vital part of magic. This is magic!"

Panting a little, and flicking grey locks from his eyes, Kargan began to rattle out a swift and complex litany that seemed designed solely to confound the Students.

"Magical runes belong to a one-hundred-and-sixty-three letter alphabet divided into six families, with twenty-seven accents and fifty-two inflections. The runes of each family vary in context depending on order, tone, speed of delivery and cadence.

"A spell consists of a series of runes, chanted with perfect diction and tone. A given rune will link smoothly only to certain others, and only in certain ways. Some runes can't be used to begin or end a spell. An accented rune cannot be used before a joining-rune or after a rising inflection except when preceded by a tonal modifier."

Although Grimm loved books and read all he could, he did not

understand most of what the Magemaster had said, and he feared that all Kargan's lessons would be given in this rapid-fire, impenetrable style.

Perhaps the other boys were trained in this sort of language, he thought. Maybe I'll never get the hang of it! He risked a surreptitious glance at the rest of the class, but the blank, stunned expressions of the other Students suggested that they were as confused as he.

"Sounds complicated, doesn't it?" Kargan beamed like a madman. "It is. Yet this is one subject you will have to learn and understand before you take the ring. I did not lie: from the understanding of runes comes the whole panoply of performed magic and sorcery."

Kargan paused to let his words sink in, his head swivelling back and forth like an owl's as he scanned his stunned flock.

"Like music," he said, "if you do not have the ear for it, you may be able to scratch out a few simple spells by rote, but you will never become a spellcaster, any more than a tone-deaf urchin can play for the Gallorley Philharmonia."

A wide, seraphic grin appeared on the mage's face. "So let's see if any of you has a half-way decent ear. You're all going to sing for me!" Kargan's expression suggested that he had just offered the Students some marvellous treat, but some of the boys looked aghast.

What has singing to do with magic? Grimm wondered, and he could tell he was not alone in this thought.

Kargan turned to Madar, sitting at the right hand side of the front bench. "Stand up, boy! What is your name?"

In a tiny voice, the boy stammered, "M-Madar Gaheela, Lord M-Mage."

Kargan nodded, and his own voice reduced in intensity to a bearable level as he said, "Ah, yes; Gaheela. Your father would be Ahad Gaheela, the master trader? In that case, I trust you have inherited his love of music, and even a little of his talent. I heard him playing the violin when I was an honoured guest at last year's New Year Recital in Ayre. It was most moving!"

He regarded the boy with apparent respect, but he did not speak. As the silence became uncomfortable, Madar blurted, "I can play the violin, the vihuela, the trumpet and the dulcimer, Lord Mage. Last year I won a credential as First Cantor in the Preslor Abbey choir."

"EX-cellent!" crowed the strange mage. "Then I am sure you won't have any problem singing this little phrase. Sing it exactly as you hear it, and don't try to interpret it. We're looking for perfection here, Gaheela, not artistic impression."

Kargan produced a silver flute from his robes and played a fluent, liquid ten-second phrase with trills and strange intervals. After clearing his throat, Madar repeated it in a clear, strong voice.

Kargan nodded. "You may sit down, Gaheela, that was quite adequate." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Almost acceptable, in fact."

Grimm saw Madar stiffen, and he could tell his friend felt affronted. Nonetheless, the red-headed boy sat and said nothing.

Kargan played a different phrase to each boy, each of whom repeated the flute's notes with varying degrees of success. For some of the boys, Kargan had to repeat the phrase several times, each time with growing impatience. To those who performed well, Kargan offered a humorous mock-insult or faint praise, but Grimm could see that they were actually tokens of affection. Boys who had no ear for music were merely thanked and asked to return to their seats, and Kargan made no comment on their lack of musical talent. After half an hour, he reached the boy on Grimm's left. Grimm noticed that Madar turned and offered Argand a friendly but mournful grimace.

"And your name is?"

"Argand Forutia, Lord Mage"

"How's your singing, Forutia?"

"Lord Mage, I don't know. I have never sung."

"WHAT?" Kargan's eyes were wide and his jaw slack. "A boy who has never sung?" The Magemaster's expression suggested that he considered this the worst misfortune that could possibly befall a child.

Shaking his head, the mage seemed to gather his composure once more, and he spoke in a more reasonable tone. "Well, then, Forutia, now is your time to start! Please sing this."

He played another phrase on his flute. The boy took a deep breath and began to sing. Or rather, he began to recite in a rhythmic monotone. His timing was fair, but the single note Argand seemed able to produce hovered achingly distant from any note or interval in any standard musical pitch. Kargan stood aghast. Apparently misinterpreting the Magemaster's expression, Argand began again on a different droning delivery with no greater musical merit than the first.

"Thank you, Forutia. Thank you; that will be quite enough, Forutia! ENOUGH! STOP! DESIST! CEASE!" cried Kargan in ever-growing anguish, as Argand continued to struggle with the phrase.

Poor Argand looked distraught. Granfer Loras had told Grimm of people who never understood singing; that, to them, it had always seemed a rather contrived poetry. Grimm had not quite believed him at the time, but he did now.

Closing his eyes and shuddering for a moment, it seemed that Kargan had decided to take pity on the boy; Argand had obviously tried his best, even if the result had been less than melodious. "Thank you, Forutia," he croaked. "Perhaps your talents lie in other directions. You may sit."

Argand descended to his seat, wiping sweat from his brow as one or two sniggers arose from the anonymous depths of the class. Kargan stamped his foot and glared, his face pale except for a pair of bright red spots on his cheeks. This was no mock-fearsome pretence but a face suffused with true anger. "I will have no laughter in my class at another's misfortune!" he boomed, and Grimm could now tell the difference between Kargan's play-acting and his real emotions.

"I imagine that many of the rest of you have ears little better than our friend Forutia's," the Magemaster hissed. "Let it be known that I detest smugness and self-satisfaction, and I WILL NOT TOLERATE IT IN MY CLASS! I will have RESPECTFUL SILENCE in this class unless I ask for comment! Is that clear?"

Kargan stood with his arms akimbo, a picture of fury. "I asked if that was quite clear," he said in a low, threatening rumble.

"Yes, Lord Mage!" The Students' reflexive response rang out as if uttered by a single voice.

The mage grunted and turned to Grimm, who stood, now feeling a little sheepish at having wanted to cover his ears at Argand's unmusical eruption.

"Name?" snapped Kargan, not yet over his fit of temper.

"I am Grimm Afelnor, Lord Mage." Grimm's voice was almost a whisper.

Kargan raised an eyebrow, but not in disapprobation, and his face brightened at once. "So you are the grandson of Loras Afelnor?" he asked.

"That is my Granfer's name, Lord Mage."

Kargan nodded. "Ah, that man had a splendid voice. I shall be glad if you have but one-tenth of his talent. Do you sing?"

"Yes, Lord Mage. Granfer says I have what he calls a perfect ear."

"Ha!" Kargan snorted. "If I had one copper bit for each time I heard that, I'd be a rich man. Still, if Afelnor approves of your voice, it must at least be of an acceptable quality. Kindly sing this." He played another, different phrase on his flute. Grimm echoed it at once, in a sweet treble. Kargan played a longer, more complicated phrase and again Grimm reproduced it without effort. Then, Kargan asked Grimm to repeat the first phrase without the aid of the flute. Half way through the phrase, Argand joined in with the flute, and seemed well pleased to find the two sounds in perfect agreement.

He spent the next few minutes setting vocal tests and traps for Grimm, but the boy negotiated these with ease. He loved music almost as much as he loved literature, and this seemed more like pleasure than work.

Kargan gave a satisfied smile and spoke in a more gentle voice than usual, as if he feared that Grimm's ears might be damaged by his

usual stentorian delivery. "A perfect ear, indeed," he said, "with a voice to match. Precious tools, Afelnor, precious tools they are, and all too rare; take care of both. They will be of great aid in your appreciation and application of magic. You may sit."

He turned to the class and adopted another one of his forbidding facial expressions. "Now, if I know boys," he said in a voice that, although only mock-serious, bore an unmistakable undertone of steel. "Some of you will be thinking evil thoughts about young Afelnor, not least because of his charitable status."

"Be grateful for your silken robes, your fine food and your warm cells. Enjoy them; they are your prerogatives of rank, and I for one would never begrudge them. However, Afelnor has something rare and precious that cannot be purchased, cozened or stolen. Allow him the comfort of his talent, and do not think ill of him for it."

He leant forward, clasping his hands in the small of his back, as if to give his words more force. "Should I hear of any spiteful words that might come Afelnor's way because of my praise of his voice, the perpetrator will FEEL THE BACK OF MY BLOODY HAND! I, too, have a good ear; most sensitive, it is. You would be astonished at what I can hear at times!"

His glare swept the room like the beam of a lighthouse, and nobody seemed willing to meet it.

"I am glad that is well understood," Kargan purred. "A little warning: in future, I may expect any of you to sing without notice. So; practice, practice, practice!"

He punctuated the last three words by flexing his knees, so that he looked like a frog about to leap. Kargan was plainly at least a little deranged, and Grimm fought to maintain a stony face at this ludicrous spectacle.

"He's quite mad," Argand muttered.

Grimm nodded. "I know," he whispered, "but I think I like him."

"Then you must be mad, too." Argand tapped his right temple with an extended forefinger.

"Now, the next boy," Kargan roared, returning to his mission. "Your name, boy?"

"Akad Horth, Lord Mage," another Student squeaked, his face beetroot-red, and Grimm could not tell if that was through panic or an overwhelming desire to laugh.

"Well, Horth, let us hear your rendition of this little tune..."

Kargan relentlessly assayed the singing talents of the rest of the class. Some had a poor command of tone, some lacked a sense of cadence and others had weak voices. Some sang very well, and they were given lukewarm compliments, but Kargan seemed careful not to insult or belittle any of the Students.

When all the recitals were finished, Kargan moved to the huge slate at the front of the class and unrolled a scroll with twenty or so strange characters on it, which he attached to the board. Grimm noticed that the scroll duplicated part of the mural around the classroom.

The Magemaster interlaced his fingers and flexed, making his knuckles crackle like gunfire.

"The FIRST RUNE FAMILY!" he boomed. "They are no more or less important than any other rune group, but they are the first that we will study. To begin, you will just learn the names of the runes until they are well-seated in your thick skulls!"

Kargan dabbed his face with a blue handkerchief. He was slightly red in the face and perspiring freely, but he showed no sign of slowing the pace.

"Where was I?" he muttered before continuing. "Ah, yes, the First Rune Family! These twenty-nine basic runes are used for the first spells you will ever master: the Minor Magics. They are also used in most other spells that you will ever encounter. Recite after me: Adzh, Karkh, Tekh, Rukh, Urth..."

By the end of the afternoon, the boys were tired and hoarse with recitation, but Kargan had lost none of his energy and volume. The man seemed indefatigable. When the bell rang, he looked quite disappointed.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Copy these down and learn them well. Tomorrow, I shall expect all of you to recite them by heart and to be able to write them in a fair hand. If you cannot master these runes, I shall be VERY DISPLEASED, and we will carry on until they are known by all!"

Again, Kargan produced his broad, infectious smile, implying that some great fun was in store for the shell-shocked Students.

"It may interest you to know that I have a small pet bird who can recite them all. He is no captive Mage Shapeshifter, I assure you, but a

true representative of the avian persuasion! When you have thoroughly absorbed these runes at least as well as my feathered companion, we shall move on to the manner in which these are coupled together to make spell syllables; the basic vocabulary of the craft. Later, we shall consider the written forms of the runes and the methods of joining them into fluid script. Thank you, gentlemen. That will be all."

The boys trooped out of the class, with little conversation, as each looked at his slate. There was much to be done before the morrow. Grimm breathed a deep sigh of relief as he left the room. Kargan was a strange, complex, emotional man, and the boy thought it would take a little while before he became used to the Magemaster's mercurial moods.

Chapter 13: Class Enemies

In the refectory that evening, Grimm was sitting alone at a plate of cold salt fish and boiled cabbage when he was joined by Madar and the tone-deaf Argand Forutia, who were brought sumptuous meals which had been prepared for them. Others in the hall had similar fare but had snubbed him, and Grimm had caught the chilly words "rotten pauper" and "guttersnipe" from some.

"Grimm, may we join you?" Madar asked in a friendly manner. Grimm nodded, wary of a prank, despite the boy's frank, open face. The fact that these rich boys wanted to join him at the poorer end of the Refectory put him on his guard.

"You talked of your grandfather. Wasn't he a mage here?" Argand asked.

"Doorkeeper said he was, but Granfer never talks... talked of it."

Argand swallowed a mouthful of roast meat with some difficulty. "Some other boys were saying that he was quite a senior mage, is that right? Don't worry, we're not going to blab or set you up."

Madar gave his head a vigorous shake in apparent disavowal of any intended treachery.

"I was told that he was a Questor, whatever that is," Grimm said.

Madar whistled, impressed. "Crohn said that they were one of the best kinds of mage."

Grimm continued with difficulty. "He... they don't like him here. He... he did something bad. I don't really want to say any more." His heart full, he looked down at his meagre meal, but his hunger had vanished.

Argand put a meaty hand on Grimm's shoulder. "Don't worry, Grimm, we'll look after you, won't we, Madar? Your secret's safe with us. Here, have some roast lamb. I'm stuffed." Madar and Argand piled Grimm's plate high with delicacies, and Grimm stammered thanks, with tears in his eyes at their generosity. After a moment's hesitation, he began to attack the pile of food before him, discovering that he was hungry, after all.

"Don't mention it Grimm," said Madar. "Argand and me know what it's like to be nobody. Both our Das had to earn their money instead of being given it, and the boys who were born rich don't like that. You'll soon see that there're class differences, even among rich boys."

"And I like you 'cause you didn't laugh at me like the others did," Argand said, raising a dismissive hand as Grimm opened his mouth to reply.

"Oh, I know you wanted to, but you were nice enough not to join

in. Not like that stuck-up lot over there." Argand stuck a contemptuous thumb towards a cackling knot of well-dressed boys.

"That slimy toad Shumal Tolarin over there's the worst of them," Argand said. "His father's a magi... magistrate or something, and he doesn't like my Da because he had to borrow money off Da when things were tight. He treated me like a leper at our first school until I got bigger than him and gave him a good thrashing. He knows he'll get it again if he tries anything funny. He always goes around with that soppy limpet, Ruvin Terruren, but Ruvin runs away like a scared rabbit if anyone threatens him when Shumal isn't around to look after him."

"And Shumal doesn't like me 'cause my Da grew up in the slums but earns more now than his Da," chimed in Madar. "'Cause he grew up poor, he-my Da, that is-knows how to fight. He taught me, too, 'cause I wasn't very big or strong. Shumal knows whatever he gets from Argand, he'll get from me, too." Madar's voice held no trace of boasting. He spoke with a confidence that spoke of experience.

Grimm gasped. "You mustn't fight-it's in the rules! They'll throw you out!"

Argand laughed. "That's only if you're caught doing it, you idiot," he crowed. "You don't fight out in the open where anyone can see, silly! Anyway, I hear they don't press the rules too much here if you've got money."

"I've heard that, too," said Grimm. "But what if Shumal tells on you?" He felt concerned for his bold new friend, fearing that lessons learnt in a primary school playground might not apply quite as well to the austere Guild House.

Madar spoke up. "Not even Toady Tolarin would dare to peach," he said. "His life wouldn't be worth it, I promise you. Me and Argand've been at lower school with most of these boys since we were little, and ratting on other boys is one thing you don't ever, ever do. He might try to get even with us somehow, but even he wouldn't dare tell. He knows his life wouldn't be worth living if he did."

Grimm felt dubious, but he kept his counsel. These two boys' confidence seemed in stark counterpoint to his own complete ignorance.

"You'd be surprised how many boys come into class with black eyes they got from falling down stairs or walking accidentally into doors," Madar said. "I've had my share of them, but I always got even on the quiet."

"But not telling doesn't apply to us," Argand said, and Madar nodded in agreement. "If that pig, Shumal, or anyone else starts on you, don't you be scared to tell us; just never, ever tell any of the Magemasters. And if you ever do come here with a black eye and say

you walked into a door, I'll give you another one." Argand flourished a large, admonitory fist. "You must always, always tell your friends the truth."

"But I'd rather tell everybody the truth," Grimm said, "I was always told not to lie, and I really don't want to lie to the Magemasters. They'll know if you don't tell the truth, anyway."

Madar sighed, as if confronted by a rather stubborn and doltish pet. "Of course they know, and they know that you know they know... you know?" he got out with some effort, as if his mouth were running ahead of his brain.

"It's all part of the game-it's not lying to them, Grimm. Those old fools'd rather stay in their cells with a bottle of wine at night and let us sort out everything among ourselves. The Magemasters here might wear wizards' cowls and big beards and carry their big mage staffs-staves, is it?-but they aren't any different to the teachers at our old school.

"They want you to keep trouble away from them, not come running every time you get a bloody nose. And they still tell you to say who did it to you, even though they don't want to know. They'll despise you if you do squeal, even if they ask you to your face. Lying about fighting is about the only lie you can get away with to a teacher... or a Magemaster. We know, we really do.

"They all make a big thing about how important telling the truth is in this place, but it's just like Lower School, really. We'll make sure you don't get any nasty black eyes to explain."

"I can fight, too," Grimm said, with a touch of defiance, "I can fight my own battles."

The two other boys were no taller than Grimm, but much broader and more muscular, and they proffered him identical, indulgent smiles, as if listening to the babble of a feeble-minded relative. "Well, let's just forget about that for the moment, shall we? Call it a trade: I'll fight for you, and you can try to teach me this singing thing."

"And I'll fight for you and you can teach me how to see this aura thing Crohn talks about," Madar added.

"That's fair enough." Grimm smiled and shook hands with Argand and Madar. Despite his confident boast, he had no experience of more than minor scuffles.

"If you don't mind too much, we really ought to practice these rune things first," he said, "I can't remember half of them, and Crohn will be testing us tomorrow."

"That's the second thing, not first," Madar corrected. "You eat up first, and then we'll have a go at the prunes."

"Runes," Grimm said.

"Whatever. You're really quite skinny, Grimm, and I think you

need to put some meat on your bones. 'Specially if you're serious about all these battles you're going to fight. You wouldn't last ten seconds, the state you're in now.'

Madar tried to wink, although he ended up just screwing up one side of his face.

Grimm giggled, nodded and addressed the serious business of tackling the heaped plate in front of him.

Chapter 14: Politics

Thorn Virias, the mighty Mage Questor and Prelate of Arnor House, was deep in mortal combat with nothing more fearsome than a stack of papers. Anybody who imagined the life of Prelate of a Guild House was a glamorous sinecure, he thought, was either a fool or misinformed.

The tale told by the papers was depressing. The intake of paying Students was down over the last year by a fifth; that would make the House budget tight. Almost as bad was the fact that there was only one new charity case this year: the Afelnor boy. Thorn couldn't very well attempt to make Questors of fee-paying pupils, not when their parents were the kind of civic dignitaries who could make life very difficult for him indeed, if word ever reached them that their darling child had not been treated in accordance with his high social standing.

Some of the boys' fathers were Guild Mages themselves; some of them were even High Lodge incumbents. Some of the application letters made it plain that Arnor House had not been their first choice, which worried Thorn. He yearned for more Questors, but he knew he could not forge such mages from the sons of wealthy parents who might well know the risks involved in the Questor Ordeal.

Thorn remembered only too well the long months of his own Ordeal, and he hated his mother for having allowed him to undergo it, even if it had made a Mage Questor of him. The wealth and status he had earned from a lifetime's Quests had not assuaged that feeling in the least.

Nonetheless, a good Questor was worth a hundred pampered, well-paying Students, no matter how long they remained in the Scholasticate. Thorn had little compunction about putting yet another Student through the same Ordeal that he had so unwillingly undergone.

It was a fine line to walk. He might have few scruples about putting a hundred boys through the Ordeal in order to gain one new Questor, but High Lodge would have their eyes upon him. As Prelate of Arnor House, he could argue that the risk was worth the reward, but only so far. He was meant to have the welfare of all of his flock at heart, and a reputation for callousness might hurt irrevocably his prospects of election to the post of Dominie. No matter that he felt forced onto that road by Lizaveta's insatiable, vicarious drives; if he were ever to become the Dominie, it would be on his own terms.

Thorn never missed a chance to fulfil High Lodge's requests, regardless of the risk to the mages that he so willingly dispatched to aid in some High Lodge Quest or Great Spell. It was easy to justify this

aid as being for the good of the whole Guild.

Nevertheless, although Weatherworkers were occasionally called upon to relieve drought or famine in some Guild demesne, and good Readers were in some demand for the successful completion of Great Spells, High Lodge often demanded Questors for such activities, and Thorn had precious few of these to spare.

Arnor House had but three Questors: Olaf, Xylox and Dalquist.

Olaf was approaching his century, and too old to withstand the rigours of the trail. Dalquist, his youngest Questor, was still only a First Rank Mage, and it might take some time before he became accepted.

Xylox, who carried the Guild cognomen 'the Mighty', was still in his thirties, and he was well-respected by Lord Dominie Horin. Thorn had proposed the powerful Questor for the most difficult and dangerous Quests High Lodge had to offer, so as to raise Arnor House's profile in the eyes of the Dominie. So far, the mage had been successful, and the Prelate trusted he would continue to be so.

It was good that Xylox had proved so competent in this role, but the House had Quests of its own to fulfil. It was never known when a Questor might be needed to foment covert insurrection in some hostile region, to abstract some item from its current owner or to carry out some political assassination. However, High Lodge tended to risk its own mages only in hours of great need, and Thorn was only too happy to volunteer the services of his own.

The Prelate hated politics, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to juggle the demands of High Lodge, so that his status with the ruling body could be improved, along with that of his own Presidium. This should increase Arnor House's wealth and prominence, so that his standing with regard to the rest of the Guild remained good.

High Lodge might have the casting vote on electing the next Dominie, but it would be a bold High Lodge Conclave that chose to ignore the opinions of the individual Houses who, after all, were the ultimate source of that august institution's vast wealth and power.

The new Questor, Dalquist Rufior, had performed well on his first Quest. The former Lord Grall of Shelt had been abstracted from his well-guarded fortress, with only a few casualties among his more zealous guards and delivered, trembling, to his brother Burres. Within a day, Grall's head had been placed on a spike and Burres had been declared the Duke of Shelt. Arnor now had free passage through the town, and a Duke who was far more receptive to Thorn's requests.

As if by providence, the green scrying crystal on his oak desk lit, and a familiar mind wound its way into his own.

Thorn drew the crystal towards himself.

Yes, Lord Dominie Horin? he thought.

Lord Prelate Thorn, I offer you greetings! I would like to thank you personally for the recent aid of your Questor, Xylox. Your continuing services to our Guild are appreciated greatly, not least because of the noble efforts of the estimable Questor on our behalf. Xylox has been well rewarded for his valour and your own House's share of the proceeds will be, of course, handsome.

Thorn found this welcome news, and he said so.

We may have another Quest for you in the near future, replied the Dominie. A Questor and a Shapeshifter would be of great benefit to its successful completion. Do you have anybody in mind?

I have a new Questor now: Dalquist Rufior, who has performed well on his first Quest, thought Thorn, with not a little pride, and our latest Neophyte Questor, Erekan Garan, is surely very close to the completion of his education. I will be happy to offer their services to our common cause.

I congratulate you on raising another Questor, Thorn. Perhaps we could... Thorn felt a sudden upsurge in the Dominie's emotions.

Your new Questor-I trust he was not responsible for that little incident in Shelt?

The Dominie's mental tone was far from congratulatory, and Thorn wondered if he had overstepped the mark.

Indeed, Lord Dominie. Questor Dalquist may well have transgressed the letter of his orders, but we now have a regime in Shelt, one far more attuned to the needs of the Guild...

Well, thank you very much for that, Thorn, hissed the Dominie's reply. For your information, we at High Lodge already had our collective eye on that particular town. We were in the process of gathering mages together for a Great Spell to persuade Duke Grall to mollify his attitude towards us. Burres is a callow, ambitious upstart who could well destabilise the entire region!

Thorn gulped. He had hoped that the downfall of Grall might gain him compliments rather than angry rebukes.

I am prepared to stand behind any Prelate who seeks to extend his influence, continued the Dominie, but this little escapade has cost me no little loss of sleep. Other towns in the region, towns allied to the Guild, are wary of what Burres' next move will be. He is not at all popular with them, and they believe he may already be beginning to eye their own lands with some avarice. I regret that I will not be engaging your services on this occasion, Lord Thorn.

Thorn all but exploded in his seat. For a few moments, he pounded his fists on the table, unseen by his lord and master. At last, having composed himself, he asked, Have you any reason for this, Lord Dominie?

You have done well for us in the past, conceded Horin, but I think it best if your mage, Dalquist, lies low for a time, while I resolve this situation as best I can. I will contact Prelate Zhar at Brelor House. The services of his mages Garan Soul-stealer and Targu the Flier should suffice.

In the depths of his being, well hidden from the mind of Horin, Thorn fumed. His mother would be furious at the thought of that bloated charlatan, Zhar, stealing his thunder once more.

Olaf Demonscurge is well rested after his last Quest, Lord Dominie. I am sure he would be happy to aid High Lodge once more, suggested Thorn, wheedling as best he could. He knew that to propose Xylox the Mighty once more would be taken as a sign of weakness.

Olaf was once a potent Questor, Horin shot back, but he is older than either of us. This is a young man's game, Thorn, as you well know. I could hardly expect a Shapeshifter to be much younger than sixty years of age, but a Questor? Even Xylox the Mighty is entering middle age. Where are your experienced thirty-year-old Questors; young lions, hungry for battle?

Once prominent in the Guild, Arnor House had been diminishing in reputation for two decades. Each year, fewer and fewer families sent their offspring to Arnor, and, despite the availability of many charity places, even these were poorly subscribed. Thorn was not prepared to admit that to anybody, not even his Dominie.

We have had some near misses recently, Dominie, he protested. You know how it is. One cannot predict when a new Questor will arise. I have recently enrolled the grandson of Loras Afelnor, and I have high hopes for him.

Afelnor? spat Horin's thoughts. Were you so desperate as to take in the seed of that traitor? Still, far be it for me to lay the sins of the father onto the head of his son. Thorn could not see Lord Horin, but he could envision a dismissive shrug as if the Dominie were standing before him.

I congratulate you on your adherence to the true spirit of the Guild, continued Horin. Few Prelates would be able to countenance accepting the progeny of the would-be murderer of a House Prelate into their ranks. I know the guidelines on the acceptance of charity Students give priority to the descendants of thaumaturges, but this seems to stretch those guidelines to the limits!

Thorn knew he was fighting a losing battle, but he persisted.

Think of the prospects, Lord Dominie. If the boy is a tenth as powerful as his grandfather, we could have a potent, useful Questor on our hands, so long as the blood runs true.

It is not as simple as that, Thorn, as well you know, shot back Horin. If the boy is of regulation age, it will surely be another decade

before you can be sure of any Questor talent, or indeed any mage talent, within the lad.

Let us assume that, by the alignment of the factors of fortune, the boy does hold the promise of becoming a Questor. You will then need to tread that narrow path we both know so well and, should Afelnor have enough power to shame his grandfather, it might all be for nothing in the end; the ways of blood are fickle and unreliable, and the boy might not even be suitable for assessment as a Reader, let alone strong enough in mind to become a Questor. If he is tried as a Questor and he proves unsuitable, more years will pass before you find his true vocation, if any. By that time, he will have reached the age where he can leave of his own free will.

Thorn licked his lips, determined not to back down.

The boy has great inner strength and will, Lord Horin, just as Loras did; I have seen him myself. His will is strong, and I am sure that Loras Afelnor wants him to persist until mastery, if he is able. He may become no Questor, but I am certain that he has the potential to carry the Staff in some guise, should he persist.

That is good, replied Horin, at once, but my needs are somewhat more immediate. In any case, you should think yourself lucky that I have decided to recommend to the High Lodge Presidium that your actions in Shelt were a mere miscalculation on your part. If you had another young Questor to offer us, I am sure he might be considered but, on this occasion, I think your new Questor, Dalquist, is just a little-shall we say?-'too hot to handle' at the moment.

Thorn steamed, but he could not think of anything to say. All he knew was that Questor Dalquist would pay for this debacle.

Fear not, Horin continued. I am sure that Prelate Zhar will be able to assist me in the successful completion of this Quest. Thank you for your time, Lord Prelate. With that, Horin cut the mental connection between the two mages.

Thorn raged, pounding his fists again on the oak desk, and bouncing in his seat like a stotting antelope.

Damn Horin. Damn Zhar! Damn Mother! He had thought on his first accession to the position of Prelate that his post was a mere sinecure, but it had proved to be more arduous and frustrating than the most difficult Quest in which he had ever taken part.

Every High Lodge Quest that Thorn was unable to assist was another opportunity for that pathetic excuse for a mage, Zhan, to press home his own claim to pre-eminence. Brelor was a relatively new House, scarcely a century old, but it was in a far more prosperous district than Arnor, and parents were keen to send their brats there.

Arnor House, one of the most ancient in the Guild, high on its imposing mountaintop, and which predated the formation of the

ruling body, was just too remote from civilisation. Thorn had spent several fortunes-although never his own, of course-in the expansion and beautification of the austere fortress, whose governance he might have inherited at the expense of Loras, but, to his regret, for little personal gain.

High Lodge is letting too many little fish into the pool, fumed Thorn. Once I have reached the ranks of Dominie, there will be a real shake-up in High bloody Lodge. I'll see and know who my real friends are, and I'll act accordingly.

Focus, he thought. Get Rufior on another Quest as soon as possible; the more hazardous the better, in order to be able to justify his advancement. Push him up the ranks with all speed. Even Horin will not deny Dalquist his status, if the boy successfully completes a sufficient number of dangerous House Quests for our common good. That should rehabilitate him in High Lodge's eyes, and then even our beloved Dominie should take notice of young Rufior. I feel sure the lad will not complain if he is sent on another Quest as soon as possible.

It's all very well for Horin to chide Thorn for Arnor House's lack of young talent, he thought, but High Lodge is sometimes just a little too eager to grab my best new mages.

In the past decade, Thorn had lost eight promising mages to High Lodge, consisting of four Manipulants, two Necromancers, one Shapeshifter and one Weatherworker.

It had never occurred to Thorn to refuse High Lodge's requests, and, Thorn suspected, Horin was only too happy to boost his own ranks as long as Thorn played along. Thorn never considered the fact that this current tricky situation was of his own making, in his eagerness to put the Lodge in his debt.

The Prelate resisted the urge to throw the scrying crystal through the closed window.

Action, Virias, not anger!

Patterning his mind for Telepathy, Thorn sent out a call for Urel, the Senior Magemaster, and got back to his paperwork.

"Ah, Urel, how are you?"

"Well, thank you, Lord Prelate. I am looking forward to getting to work on the new Students. I think I will make Kargan their Magemaster. He will work them hard, I am sure."

"How fare your Neophytes and Adepts these days, Urel? Are there any good prospects?"

"Pollo Virida should make Necromancer within the space of two months. He is only forty-seven years old, too. It also looks as if Ujal Ribal will be ready soon to try for the Breaking Stone. Yura Shuva expects to go to the Stone within the week. The Acclamation of two new Shapeshifters is something to be proud of, Lord Prelate."

Despite himself, Thorn was impressed. Shapeshifters were highly regarded by the Lodge. "Indeed, Urel, you have done well. What of Erekan Garan, though? Will you make a Questor of him?"

"I am confident that Garan has the power and, at fourteen years, he is the perfect age. He is intelligent and hard-working, and nothing is too much trouble for him. However, I am no longer convinced that he is mentally strong enough. I would like to take a little longer to be sure, but I think he might be more useful as a Scholar. His insights and his application are remarkable in one so young."

"I am not interested in some commonplace Scholar, Urel, I want a Questor!" Thorn snapped.

"They are not known to fall from trees, Lord Thorn." Urel was a strong-willed man of considerable presence, and he was not one to back down if he believed he was in the right. "We are talking about a difficult and dangerous procedure applied to a real, live, adolescent boy. I would not proceed unless I felt very confident of success. I am not at all confident on this occasion."

"Do not presume to tell me what makes a Questor, Urel. I have seen Garan, and I am confident. You are a good Magemaster, but you are an Illusionist, not a Questor. You also do not understand politics as I do."

"I am the person who deals with High Lodge, not you, and I tell you that I need another Questor. As a Mage Questor, I believe Erekan Garan is ready, and I instruct you at least to prepare for his Ordeal. He enjoys music, I believe. That will give you something to work on."

"I will do this only under protest, Lord Prelate." Urel stood his ground well.

"Your protest is noted, Senior Magemaster," Thorn replied. "However, this is not a democracy. I order you to come up with a suitable plan of attack and report back within the month. Make this a stiff Ordeal, brutal if necessary, for we cannot wait much longer."

"Very well, Lord Prelate, I will do as you command, but, as I have said, I will go further only under protest."

"Protest as you will, Urel," the Prelate snapped, "but kindly do as you are bidden. The rewards justify the risk."

"I suspect that Erekan's parents would not agree, were they still alive."

"However, they are not still alive, Magemaster," Thorn shot back, trying hard to control his rising temper. "I am Erekan's father now and, like a father, I will be duly proud of him when his Staff rebounds for the third time from the Breaking Stone. On that day, I suspect that even you will consider these privations worthwhile."

"May I remind the Lord Prelate that this House does not revolve around Questors?" responded Urel, obdurate as ever. "We have a duty to all mages, Adepts, Neophytes and Students here. I have a duty towards the well-being of young Erekan, too."

"Whether you find satisfaction in the fact or not, Magemaster, the operations of this House do revolve around me. I have needs you do not, and cannot, understand. I have an urgent need for a Questor, and that is all that you need to know. That is all, Urel."

Thorn bent to his desk, effectively dismissing the Senior Magemaster from his presence.

Chapter 15: Song and Dance

Grimm was taking comfort in the books of the Library, as was often his wont, reading a fascinating tome concerning the fabulous achievements of the pre-Fall savants known as Scientists. They had learned to fly, to plumb the depths of the oceans and even to recreate long-dead creatures, all without the aid of magic. He was so engrossed in his reading that he did not notice a tall, young man entering the room.

As the newcomer gave a polite cough, the Student looked up to see an earnest, young man with blond hair tied back in a severe queue. A neat beard framed his jaw, and he wore simple, black robes, marking him as a poor boy like Grimm.

"They told me I'd find you here," the stranger said, in a pleasant, friendly baritone. "My name is Erek Garan, and I am attempting, for my sins, to mould a motley assortment of cracked warblers and flat-footed hoofers into something that approximates a musical entertainment. I understand that you are quite a good singer. Would you be interested in trying for a part in the show?"

"I am Grimm Afelnor, Sir Erek," Grimm said carefully, "and I would really like to help you any way I can." The Students had been told to speak respectfully to their elders, and this was also firmly enshrined in the Rules.

"Erek' will be fine, Grimm. I'm no Mage or Adept. Until recently, in fact, I was a Student just like you. I'm a Neophyte, halfway between a cur and a Sir. Like a stray dog, I am more used to being addressed as 'Hey, you'."

Grimm smiled broadly at Erek's cheery demeanour. Even without access to his Mage Sight, which he now knew would be considered impolite, he could tell this was an intelligent, good-humoured person who was slow to anger.

"Erek, I'd really like to sing with you, if I can," Grimm said, pleased that this lofty Neophyte had chosen to approach a lowly Student. "I have a friend called Madar who's a very good singer, and another friend called Argand who can't sing at all, but I know he likes to dance. They're rich boys, but not at all snobby. Can they come, too?"

At that moment, as if they had been summoned, Madar and Argand burst into the room, dishevelled and muddy. "Grimm," Madar cried, "You'll never guess what that idiot... oh, sorry, Sir." He broke off, noticing the presence of Erek.

"Breaches of Rules 1.7.1, 1.7.3 and 2.2.6, unless I am sorely mistaken," intoned Erek, in a fair imitation of the glacial Crohn, as

Madar, Grimm and Argand looked aghast, "but, maybe, if you don't say anything, I won't, either. I would, however, point out that some of the older Adepts take their afternoon naps in here, and they're not as forgiving as I am. Best to keep it quiet next time."

Grimm, remembering his manners, introduced EreK to his friends.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Madar, Argand," EreK said, smiling. "I hear great things about you from young Grimm, here. Young talent should be encouraged. Will you accompany me to the assembly hall? I'm sure I can find you all something to do in the entertainment that I'm planning. Are you interested?"

With fervid nods of assent, the three friends followed EreK down the stairs and through the corridors to the assembly hall. On Grimm's first true day as a Student, his impression had been that the hall was small and cramped, due to the mass of people crammed into the room. Now, it seemed cavernous.

Numerous Students of varying ages milled about. Some of them sawed wood; others laid flat on the floor, painting huge canvases, and others practiced singing, dancing or speaking parts with companions in small groups around the hall. Grimm had never seen anything like it. It looked to be an exciting and fulfilling activity, and the sheer glamour of the enterprise held him spellbound.

EreK walked over to another boy of about the same age. Grimm could not hear what the two lads said, but he saw EreK gesticulate toward him and his friends.

The two youths moved towards the young Students.

"Gentlemen," EreK intoned, as if addressing a gathering of grantees, "This is Akral Sharetz, the stage manager and talent scout for the extravaganza we hope to stage here. If you can impress him, he has agreed to find you parts for the entertainment. We don't have as many youngsters as we had hoped for, so you have a good chance if you are talented."

A loud crash sounded from the back of the hall. "Hey, Farral!" EreK shouted, "Be careful there, those props cost money!" He dashed off, leaving Grimm and his friends with Akral, an old hand of fifteen or so, with sandy-coloured hair and a restless, adventurous air.

Akral folded his arms across his chest. "Well, boys, let's see what you can do, shall we? Let's have your party pieces."

Confidently, Madar assumed the pose of a Shalian Bard, his left leg crooked at the knee, his right arm resting at a jaunty angle on his hip and his left arm curved above his head.

"This is a charming old melody called 'I Met a Young Maiden at Buxom Fair'," he declared, for all the world like a worldly troubadour, winking at his small audience and starting to sing in a sweet treble that was at odds with the bawdy lyrics of the song. Grimm did not

understand many of the words that flew so fluently from Madar's mouth, but he understood enough to know that the song was no genteel ballad.

Akral roared with laughter, and then clapped with enthusiasm as Madar finished the last stanza with a perfectly executed bow, sweeping an imaginary feathered cap from his head in a graceful arc.

"Well sung, Madar," said the fair youth, his face pink from his laughter. "I would wager you never learned that ditty at your mother's knee!"

Madar shrugged. "My Uncle Tomas was a merchant sailor," he said. "He picked up a lot of different songs from his travels."

Akral stood for a few moments, his eyes closed and his right index finger pressed over his lips.

"I am sure I have just the part for you," he said, his face clearing. "I would, however, advise you to restrain yourself from such... pungent lyrics in the presence of the Magemasters! I do trust you have some more decorous songs in your repertoire?"

"A few," Madar conceded.

"That's excellent," Akral replied. "Now... Gramm, is it? Ah, yes, Grimm. What do you have for our regalement; perhaps something a little more acceptable to delicate ears?"

Grimm racked his brain for songs. Clearing his throat, he said nervously, "I would like to sing 'I Had a Little Dog'."

Madar gave an indulgent laugh. "That's a little child's song!"

Akral admonished him with a raised finger. "More suitable than your steamy offering at least, you young lecher." Turning back to Grimm, he said, "Please, do continue."

Grimm had not sung the song for some time and, for a few panicked moments; he could not remember the lyric for the life of him. Then the first words, "I stopped outside a little shop", popped unbidden into his head, and the rest tumbled out of him like a waterfall. He had no idea of how well he had sung, but Akral applauded him at the end.

"The delivery was excellent, although you didn't really project." Grimm blinked; he had no idea what Akral meant.

"Project?"

"I mean, you sounded a little nervous and insincere," Akral explained. "Still, I am sure we can fix that. You're in."

Grimm felt a warm flush of pleasure and relief; he was looking forward to being a part of this noble enterprise.

"Your offering, please... Argand?"

Argand performed a series of pratfalls and tumbles that soon had Grimm, Madar and Akral laughing at his apparent haplessness, veering from one near-disaster to another, but never quite losing

control.

"That's excellent, Argand," the older boy declared, when he had recovered from his own fit of laughter. "I'm sure we can find a place for you, too."

Akral inserted two fingers in his mouth and emitted a piercing whistle. All the boys in the hall looked up, and Akral waved his hand in Ereks direction.

Erek wandered back over and conversed quietly with his friend for a few moments.

Grimm could not hear what passed between Erek and Akral, but he saw them both nod.

Erek turned to the young Students and said, "I think we have some parts for you: Madar; you will take the part of a cheeky chimney-sweep called Banger. Grimm; you are a sad, tuneful urchin called Bowrite. Argand; are you happy to become a clumsy but faithful dog called Gagger. I trust you are happy with those roles?"

All three boys nodded eagerly, and Akral produced three thick sheaves of paper from a table at his side, giving one to each of them.

"Learn them as soon as you can, boys," Erek said. "First rehearsal is in two weeks." With that, he and his friend were gone.

Looking at his part, Grimm whispered to Madar, "I can't read music! How can I do this?"

"Easy," said Madar. "I can teach you to read music as easy as you taught me that Sight thing. I've been reading music since I could walk. I'll get you through it."

The unmelodious Argand riffled through his part with some panic, as if expecting to find music littering the pages like so many flies on a summer window, but he sighed with relief at finding none. "I have to howl from time to time," he explained. "I think I can do that!"

"All you have to do is sing like you normally do," Madar observed, yelping as his friend punched him in the upper arm.

The boys ran to the hall at every break to practice their parts in the entertainment. The show was scheduled for three months' time and Erek had at last managed to assemble a cast with which he declared himself satisfied.

After a few more weeks, serious rehearsals began. Grimm revelled in the musical magic of the event, having a small but important part in the pageant. Madar had seemed to enjoy rubbing soot onto his

Scholasticate-clean face, while Argand had relished rolling on the stage, uttering convincing, piteous dog-howls for his imagined, lost master.

Erek drove his charges with ruthless zeal, but Grimm did not begrudge the effort as he honed his performance to perfection. After many intense practice sessions, the cast was ready. Now, only two weeks remained until the production was revealed to the Scholasticate for the first time. Grimm could hardly wait until Kargan had finished another litany of runes to run to the hall. Madar and Argand were just behind him. Erek stood at the door, his face ashen.

"Erek, what's the matter?" cried Madar, his sweep's costume in his hand.

"There is no more practice, no more show. The entertainment will not take place," Erek said in a monotone, as if reciting a tedious speech. Grimm could tell the Neophyte was hiding considerable distress.

"I have... squandered too much time on this frivolity, to the detriment of my studies. I apologise for this, but your services will no longer be required."

Embryo tears glittered at the corners of Erek's eyes; Grimm knew this show had meant so much to him. Nonetheless, he admired the way Erek steeled himself to speak in a measured tone as was expected of a Neophyte, his previous banter and ebullience a distant memory.

"This is my fault," Erek droned. "I am to tear up all the backdrops and destroy all the properties myself. Please give me your costumes."

The boys complied, although Madar's reluctance to give up his beloved sweep's rags was evident.

Erek squeezed his eyes shut, and his voice became harsh. "No more, do you hear? A Neophyte should not waste his time in idle frivolity. Thank you for your interest but, please, go!" This last was punctuated with a small sob, and Grimm found embarrassment competing for his attention alongside confusion and disappointment.

The Neophyte turned his back on the boys and picked up a hatchet lying on the floor of the Hall. He walked to the centre of the room with a determined stride and began to destroy the beautiful props and backdrops, all of which had been constructed with love and dedication, with a fervour approaching fury.

Grimm, fighting his own tears, turned and ran from the hall, not waiting to see if his friends were behind him.

Chapter 16: "A Regrettable Incident"

Kargan strode into Grimm's classroom with his usual boisterous manner, flinging his staff into the corner of the room with a loud clatter. "Staff, stand in the corner," he muttered, and the brass-shod stick stood at obedient attention, heedless of gravity's insistent demands. The boys were impressed, since they had seen little real magic during their time in the Scholasticate.

The Magemaster turned to face them with an expression of smug satisfaction, either real or feigned; Grimm could not guess which. He slumped into a casual, almost bored, pose; one hand flat on the battered desk at the front of the class, the other resting on his hip, one leg crossed jauntily over the other.

"Gentlemen," he breathed. "Now, you belong to me." The words hung in the air, ominous and threatening, before Kargan's mouth twisted into its familiar, manic grin.

"I have the pleasure to be able to tell you," he said, "that I am now the Magemaster of your form. For my sins, I will be responsible in person for your success or failure as Students, lowly slugs though you be.

"Lord Thorn has told me that there is altogether too much laxity within the Scholasticate, and I have been given the solemn task to eradicate it within this class. I wish it understood right now that I intend to work you to within an INCH OF YOUR BLOODY LIVES and then, perhaps, a further one-twelfth of a foot if you do not apply yourselves! I will not tolerate chattering, smattering, idling, sidling, gossip, banter or sloth!"

Erek could have done with you in his show, Grimm thought, dazzled by Kargan's vocal dexterity.

"I will have my eye on the jesters and the pranksters-yes, I am looking at YOU, Gaheela!-and I will come down HARD on anybody who does not give his utmost. NOW: IS THAT AS CLEAR AS THE MOST IMMACULATE CRYSTAL?"

The boys were, as ever, stunned by Kargan's sudden shifts from soft speech to shattering shouts, but a weak, dutiful chorus of "Yes, Lord Mage" arose from the class.

"Gooooood," Kargan crooned, his voice sounding as if it came from the far end of a long tube. "Perhaps then, Turel, you would care to amuse us all with your addle-pated recollection of the First Family of Runes, laughable though it may be."

Kargan was as good as his word; the workload on the Students underwent a dramatic increase in quantity and depth. Grimm knew he was not alone in feeling as if his head would burst with all the studies on rune inflection, precedence, attributes from primary to tertiary, exclusions and modifiers, but, after a few months' study, the Students all had a reasonable command of the First Family of Runes. They could recognise, pronounce and write them and, in his classes, Crohn had even given them some basic instruction as to how they were used in spells.

The Students soon learned that the forms of the runes alone were only a starting point. Different accents and joining-strokes could completely alter the sense of a spell, or render it impotent.

Kargan's classes now encompassed the singing of sequences of runes, and Crohn explained the vital importance of accuracy and clarity of voice in spell-cast-ing. A few months more, and the boys were capable of chanting simple spells, although mistakes were frequent, due to the hard pace at which the Students were being driven.

Crohn explained that no magical transformations took place, even when the chants were correct, because the marshalling and directing of psychic energy into magical form would not be taught until much later.

In a firm tone that brooked no argument, he told the Students that undisciplined children could not be trusted to use such power responsibly, and the consequences of miscast or ill-understood spells could be quite serious. However, the Magemaster demonstrated each of the spells with their full effect, levitating small objects, mending broken pottery and producing balls of coloured light from his fingertips.

Grimm felt considerable satisfaction when Kargan or Crohn congratulated him on a well-delivered "spell", though such plaudits were few and far between.

Grimm's love of books had been dulled by the constant study of runes, and he used the Library less than he had before. He threw himself with wholehearted intensity into physical games with Madar and Argand in the large Scholasticate yard. He missed Ereks' rehearsals, which had been tiring at times but always enjoyable. To assuage the loss he felt, he threw himself into his friends' games with a reckless, almost desperate abandon. Anything had to be better than the endless, dull, stultifying repetition of runes!

One day, as Grimm's class was trooping to the Refectory for the mid-morning meal, they heard a strange high-pitched scream from one of the classrooms and ran as one to the source of the noise. Many others were gathered outside the room, with expressions ranging from callous amusement to outright terror.

An incomprehensible babbling came from behind the locked door, and a calm, measured tone that sounded like Urel's. The shrieking had reached such a level of intensity that many of the Students covered their ears. A blazing, blue light flashed around the edges of the door and, with a wet, sodden thump, the walls seemed to bulge outwards for an instant, with blue tendrils flickering from the very interstices of the stone blocks. Then came the sound of a chair being dragged across the floor and a final, decisive thump. Silence once more reigned.

Magemaster Crohn, his hair and robes flying, pushed his way through the throng, bereft of his normal gravity. "What are you boys doing here?" he cried. "To the Refectory with you! At once!"

The Students moved with reluctant, snail-like speed away from the door, as Crohn smashed it down with his staff.

Grimm could see that the classroom now seemed to be covered in red paint, and a single figure hung in the centre of the room, suspended from the ceiling by a cord around his neck. It looked like Erek. Crohn cut the blue-faced figure down and tried to revive him with increasing intensity, but to no avail.

Running from the room, Crohn shrieked at the nearest boy. "You, boy! Fetch Magemaster Fyr, the Healer, immediately! RUN! The rest of you, go to the Refectory and stay there, or in your cells, until you are told otherwise. The afternoon class is cancelled!"

The Students looked uncertain, nervous and confused. With tremendous effort, Crohn regained his composure. "Do I have to tell you twice? Go to the Refectory, right now! There is nothing more to see here."

At that moment, the Scholasticate Healer, Fyr, arrived, out of breath and as dishevelled as Crohn. With a cry of "Oh, no, no, no!" he rushed into the room and leapt to the prostrate body.

Crohn's gaze was icy and commanding, his voice low and dangerous. "Go. Now. This is your last warning."

Something seemed to push the boys away, and they finally fled.

Thorn looked harried, and much in need of sleep. Magemaster Crohn retained a respectful silence while the Prelate gathered his thoughts.

Rubbing his brow in a pained manner, Thorn gave a deep sigh. "What went wrong, Crohn?"

The Magemaster picked his words with care. "I knew Garan quite well, Lord Prelate. When Magemaster Urel told me what you had in mind for the boy, I advised caution, and he raised his own doubts about the boy's suitability.

"If I may be frank, Lord Thorn, I feel that putting the Neophyte so heedlessly through such an ordeal was unforgivable! I intend to advise the Presidium of my concerns with regard to his tuition, and I cannot but accept that you had a major role to play in the tragic losses of Neophyte Garan and Senior Magemaster Urel."

Thorn straightened his back and looked the Magemaster straight in the eyes. His brows were lowered in an angry scowl, and his face was flushed.

"Magemaster Crohn, I would wager you have not the least understanding of the demands of Guild politics!" he snapped. "Do you have the slightest comprehension of the responsibilities that I bear? The reputation of our House with High Lodge is paramount, and I deemed it essential that we assay the Neophytes for suitability as Questors. Senior Magemaster Urel told me that, in his earnest opinion, the boy was suitable material, and I advised him to proceed with caution.

"It is now plain that Urel was derelict in his duty, painful as that is to say. I warned him that the boy might be emotionally fragile, but he assured me that he would take care not to push Garan too far.

"It is abundantly clear to me that the Neophyte was pushed too quickly and too hard. A less intense and longer Ordeal might well have saved the situation and we might have been celebrating the creation of a new Adept Questor rather than mourning the sad loss of a Magemaster and a Neophyte."

Crohn harboured grave doubts, but he respected his Prelate too much to call him a liar.

"Lord Prelate, I knew Urel for many years, as did we all," he said. "He was a kind and reasonable soul, and I cannot believe that the responsibility for this tragedy lies with him alone. Your recent general orders for greater firmness with the training of Students are of a piece with this tragic occurrence."

Seizing on Crohn's words, Thorn saw an opening. It was plain that the Magemaster would not accept the image of Urel as a sadistic slave-driver, and so he tried another tack.

"Ah, Crohn, there is such charity within your soul," he groaned, slapping a hand over his face as if in sudden, anguished awareness. "I see now that I may have been a trifle... over-zealous in my eagerness to do my duty to the House and to the Guild. Poor Urel; he was so loyal to the House that he ignored his own feelings and drove himself to fulfil the letter of my instructions with such zeal that his sense of duty blinded him to the possible consequences.

"I have nobody to blame but myself; in my eagerness to serve the Guild, I was guilty of giving imprecise orders, and I was so wrapped up in my own duty that I failed to notice the impending tragedy."

Shaking his shoulders as if suffused with self-accusation and guilt, he risked a peek through the fingers over his eyes and was gratified to see that Crohn was still nodding. It would be all right. Deniability; that was what Thorn needed, and it seemed that he had struck a rich source of it.

"Lord Prelate, I beg forgiveness for suspecting you of any ill intent in this frightful miscalculation," Crohn said, hanging his head. "Yes, Urel was a good man, but I must admit that I felt, on occasion, that his sense of dedication to the House and the Guild bordered on the fanatical, even above the love he felt for his charges. Please forgive me my odious words."

Thorn disguised a deep sigh of relief as a smothered sob. "Crohn, I mourn the passing of these two fine souls as much as you, and I see that I, too, may have been a little too wedded to my duty.

"I wish you to succeed Urel as Senior Magemaster, Crohn, and I trust you to put me back on the right track whenever you deem it necessary. My first order to you as Principal of the Scholasticate is to ensure that all Magemasters act within the dictates of their good sense and humanity. Perhaps I have been working them too hard."

"Lord Thorn, I will arrange a ceremony for our two lost friends. May I trust that you will be there?"

Thorn nodded, maintaining his pose of deep sorrow. He had to fight to keep a smile from his face; he knew he had succeeded in his pose, and that Crohn would lay the majority of the blame for this debacle on the dead Urel, as he had hoped.

Madar and Argand were sitting with Grimm in the charity Students' area of the Refectory, and the three boys were deep in discussion about the recent tragedy, despite the fact that such chit-

chat had been forbidden by Crohn. Since there were no Magemasters present, they felt at liberty to gossip, although they kept their voices low.

"An accident, eh?" Argand said. "Who'd have thought that EreK was a Neophyte Alchemist? I'd have thought he would've been better as an Herbalist or something."

Grimm nodded. "I always thought all those potions and things must be dangerous. Poor old Urel."

"Poor old EreK, too," Madar said with feeling. "He hurt so bad at what he did to Urel that he topped himself."

A snort came from another table, and the boys turned to see an older Student of about twelve or thirteen. "I've seen it once before," he confided, his eyes flicking back and forth as if expecting the presence of a Magemaster. "The whole Refectory was trashed just before you came, same blue light, the lot. Then, old Arrol comes out with that new mage, Dalquist. A right state, they were in."

Grimm was puzzled. "But Dalquist isn't an Alchemist, he's a Questor," he said, wrinkling his brow in perplexity.

"That's what I say," the older boy said. "It's all very odd. You stick around here, you hear all sorts of funny things. I'm not even sure old EreK was any kind of Alchemist-I think that's just a story they've cooked up." He shrugged and turned back to his meal.

With no further information on the incident, the heated discussion petered out. "Oh well, at least old Kargan isn't quite so hard on us these days," Madar observed with a bright smile.

"That won't last, Madar, you'll see," was Argand's gloomy response. "They're just toying with us; it's the lull before the storm. This whole thing reeks with suspicion, if you ask me."

"You think everything's suspicious, Argand," Grimm said. "Remember when Kargan had that fever and stayed in bed, and you told us all he'd been carted off to the mad-house?"

"That was different," Argand grumbled. "If he wasn't, he should have been!"

The conversation drifted into wild speculations about all aspects of Scholasticate life, but the boys steered clear of the deaths of EreK and Urel.

Back in his cell that night, Grimm mused over what little he had seen of the incident. He knew Urel would never have hurt EreK, and

nor would Ereĸ have dreamed of raising a hand to Urel. His mind kept going back to the screaming and shouting Ereĸ, and the strange, incomprehensible language that issued from his lips just before the explosion; he could not get the sounds out of his head. When sleep finally found him, his dreams were disturbing.

Chapter 17: Progression

After two years in the Scholasticate, Grimm had proved to be an apt student, quickly mastering the complexities of the seven families of runes, learning how to write, pronounce and inflect them in various circumstances.

Despite his shy nature, he felt his confidence growing stronger by the day. Now, even some of the more snobbish Students treated him with a measure of respect or, at least forbearance.

However, such tolerance was far from universal. On one occasion, the bully, Shumal Tolarin, deliberately tripped him outside the Refectory, sending Grimm sprawling to the floor, winded and with a bloodied nose.

"Ooh, so sorry!" Shumal said with a smirk on his face, as if daring the smaller boy to try something, but Grimm was too busy trying to get his breath back even to speak.

Grimm said nothing about this, even to Madar and Argand. Instead, he bided his time until he came upon Shumal in a dark corridor without his sly acolyte, Ruvin.

While Shumal had his back turned, Grimm leapt on the bully, slammed him into the wall, punched him in the nose and threw him to the floor.

Shumal was larger than Grimm and not the kind of boy to take such an affront lying down. Lurching to his feet, he gave easily as good as he got. By the time they stepped apart, their chests heaving, both boys were marked, Grimm somewhat more so than Shumal.

However, Shumal's splendid silk robes were torn and scuffed, whilst Grimm's rough, patched homespun clothing looked little different after the fight. There was no time for Shumal to change his clothes, and he looked in a sorry state when he entered Crohn's classroom. The Magemaster made a show of ignoring the gloriously-hued bruises and contusions on both boys, but he awarded a severe penance to Shumal for being untidy in class, in direct contravention of rule 2.1. Grimm was not punished.

After this incident, Shumal gave Grimm a wider berth, substituting sullen disdain for overt insults and assaults. Although Grimm had told nobody in the class about the altercation, except for Madar and Argand, the truth was plain for all to see. Many now accorded him a significant measure of respect.

More conscientious than some of the other boys in the Lower Scholasticate, the three friends studied often together, aiding each other and each reinforcing the others' knowledge and confidence. Even the nearly tone-deaf Argand learned to handle rhythmic chants and simple songs, and even Kargan of the over-sensitive ears praised him for this.

As if to compensate for Argand's lack of ear, he proved himself adept at the fluent scribing of even fourth-order runic phrases, seamlessly linking the complicated twists and curlicues of the runes together with flowing strokes of the pen. He was only too happy to aid Grimm, whose penmanship was far from exemplary.

Madar, the most talented and versatile musician of the class by some margin, gained great proficiency in the reading of the aura he had once found so difficult, rivalling even the mastery of his friend, Grimm.

Now, Grimm was nine years old, and the boys began to study other arts. Grimm found painting, dancing and woodworking difficult, but he proved more adept at mathematics, languages, history and geography. With some of the Students, Grimm had garnered a reputation as somewhat of a toady, just because of his facility with magical studies. The relative lack of rebukes from the Magemasters had only served to reinforce this image. His new problems now seemed to mollify his accusers.

Now his fallibilities had been revealed, the other boys perhaps began to see him as a mere human like them. Grimm even welcomed the waspish rebukes he received from the acerbic Magemaster Faffel, who taught Grimm's least favourite subject, Courtly Graces.

When the hapless youth was less than perfect in his dancing, as he often was, Faffel would unleash an acid tongue, the back of his hand, or a casually-cast punitive spell. The Magemaster did not have Kargan's scruples over judging the less able, and he allowed the class free reign to laugh and mock whenever Grimm made an awkward move.

"I was not aware that this particular dance was called 'The Fairy Elephant!'" Faffel spat on one occasion. "Thank you so much for enlightening us all, Afelnor. We are in your debt."

Even the mild-mannered Grimm found himself biting off retorts at

times like these. Why couldn't Faffel see that he was trying his best?

The sharp-tongued Magemaster regarded his particular discipline as the most important on the syllabus, as all the other Magemasters seemed to do, but he was more insistent and vitriolic in its defence.

"Afelnor! Yes, you, Afelnor! Attend to me! You may think that being a mage is all about dazzling displays of power, but I would advise you to correct that impression at once! A mage may have the power and skill to shame the most potent practitioners of the art, but it will bring his House little credit if he trips over his feet in the simplest dance, or belches at table, or slouches like a slattern.

"How many times have I told you that 'power and presence complete the mage'? Again, please; this time with at least a modicum of grace, if you have the slightest concept of the word!"

It was ever a puzzle to Grimm that, despite his exquisite sense of timing and his skill with music, he could not seem to persuade his feet to move in time with the music, earning him many rebukes and punishments from Faffel. He found it impossible to dance with an invisible partner, since Faffel's instruction consisted of diagrams and descriptions of how a dancing partner would move.

Madar, on the other hand, was an excellent dancer, and he underwent the penance of teaching Grimm to dance by acting as a female partner, without the least word of complaint, taking Grimm through all the main dances in the Refectory when meals were finished. At first, Grimm felt deep embarrassment to put on these displays in front of the other boys, but Madar persisted to the amusement of all, and Grimm began to improve, becoming a tolerably competent dancer. At times, he began to earn a little grudging, lukewarm praise from the curmudgeonly Magemaster Faffel.

Sometimes, this was as fulsome as "I once said that you were not fit to dance in a slum flea-pit. I now see that I was wrong. You are fit to dance in a slum flea-pit!"

The young Student rarely saw the humour in Faffel's barbed jokes, even if most of the other Students seemed to enjoy it.

Grimm's command of Representational Art, another of Faffel's subjects, was also poor, but Argand was an enthusiastic and accomplished artist, and he gave Grimm enough help to allow him to produce creditable portraits and landscapes by dint of a few simple guidelines. Nonetheless, Grimm always regarded a class in Courtly Graces with trepidation.

Every day, the Students were allowed to spend time playing in the large Scholasticate yard. Grimm now tended to shun the more physical games preferred by the more active Madar and Argand, but often other Students, some much older than Grimm's nine years, would run out of ideas for new games. On these occasions, Grimm would be consulted and would evince ideas for new games, providing that he was allowed to choose his role in each.

From time to time, Shumal would attempt to force his way into these games, often for no other reason than to upstage Grimm, but the other boys would shun him, since he always ended up punching, tripping or otherwise causing trouble, for which the blame would be shared by all.

Grimm found himself with a unique, if muted, popularity, although he often felt like a tool, to be used only when the other boys became bored. Nonetheless, he felt that he had a valuable role that was appreciated by the others, and he was always ready to venture an opinion, however it might be taken.

When Grimm was asked by one of the older Students if he would care to join in an end-of-year entertainment for the Scholasticate, he accepted with some glee, on the proviso that he would not be expected to dance. He had not forgotten the debacle of Ereks abortive pageant in his first year, but he put it behind him.

He was given the role of a travelling minstrel, and he studied the part with intense diligence in his free time. He was expected to sing a song whilst accompanying himself on the lute and, although he was not very accomplished on the instrument, he acquitted himself well, since the tune involved only simple strumming. Although nervous as he took to the stage, dressed in a loose, threadbare motley that threatened to overwhelm his slight frame, his voice did not betray him. Part of him was relieved when he had finished, but, after more than respectful applause, he found himself wishing he might carry on.

Madar and Argand were his most enthusiastic applauders, and even Kargan, who had composed the ballad, took the time to compliment Grimm on his delivery.

Grimm was happier than he had ever been in his life as the year ended. He would be on his own once more for the winter break, but he was growing in self-confidence; it now felt almost as if the

Scholasticate was the only home that he had ever known.

At the start of Grimm's third year in the Scholasticate, he and his year-mates began to be burdened with even more new subjects, but Grimm accepted the increasing workload with zeal. Whilst he found Appreciation of Art tedious, and Gymnastics difficult, because of his ill-co-ordinated body, he enjoyed Literature and found Herbalism, taught by the mild-mannered and soft-voiced Magemaster Chet, fascinating. He never tired of studying in depth the properties and uses of different herbs and plants, always hoping to surprise Chet with some new discovery, since Chet, unlike most of his fellow Magemasters, actually encouraged extracurricular studies. As a Herbalist of the Seventh Rank, Chet possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of his craft and could not be bested by any nine-year-old Student; he was, however, always appreciative of Grimm's efforts, and of those of other diligent Students.

Another new subject that Grimm enjoyed was Elementary Logic, which was taught by Crohn. He learned the uses of syllogism, sorites and deduction, and he revelled in trying to unravel the conundrums and puzzles posed by the Magemaster, as did most of the other boys. His finest hour was when Crohn asked the class to attempt to answer the question "What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?"

Many boys offered the opinion that the statement was a paradox, insoluble and intractable. Others opined that nothing would happen, but that object and force would explode into naked energy. Grimm raised his hand, was acknowledged, and rose to his feet.

"Lord Mage, it seems to me that if any force meets any object, either the object moves or it does not. If the object moves even a little bit then it is not immovable. If it does not move, then the force is not irresistible.

"So I don't-sorry, Lord Mage; I do not-know if there is such a thing as an immovable object or an irresistible force, but I do know that you cannot have both in the same world."

Crohn had said that he would show that some propositions are not amenable to a plain yes or no solution, but he declared himself unable to fault Grimm's logic.

"Why, yes; I do believe you are right, Afelnor. I had never thought about the question in that way. Excellent-very well done."

Safe in the inner depths of his mind, Grimm grinned at the Magemaster's discomfiture as the class tutor quickly posed another conundrum, "If I said 'Everything I say is a lie', could you believe me? Afelnor, your solution, please."

Grimm licked his lips in confusion. If the statement was true, this would also mean that the statement was false, and therefore

everything Crohn said was true... but that would mean that he was, in fact, a liar! It was puzzling indeed but, buoyed by his earlier success, Grimm tried to apply his rudimentary command of logic to analyse the apparent paradox.

"Lord Mage, may I assume that the opposite of 'Everything' is not 'Nothing', but 'Not everything'? If so, then the opposite of the statement becomes 'Not everything I say is the truth'. This is perfectly sensible."

Crohn seemed to have recovered his equanimity now, as if he were once more on solid ground. "A fair attempt, Afelnor," he said. "However, I am afraid that the logical opposite of 'Everything' is, in fact, 'Nothing'. Also, if you are going to completely reverse the statement it becomes 'Nothing I do not say is the truth' a: rather nonsensical statement, but one which reiterates the original proposition. You cannot just invert selected parts of a statement in order to produce its inverse; all clauses and concepts must be inverted."

Grimm struggled on. "But surely, Lord Mage, a true inverse would be 'Nothing anybody other than I does not say is the truth'?"

"I stand corrected," Crohn said, his tone acidic. "However, this does not change the sense of the matter. One can indeed attempt to tackle such a problem by addressing its inverse. However, one then has to re-state the original problem as a logical inverse of what one has just proved. The inverse of 'Nothing anybody other than I does not say is the truth' turns inexorably back to 'Everything I say is a lie', and we have solved nothing." Grimm struggled to confute Crohn's argument but nothing came to mind. Choosing discretion as the better part of valour, he gave the required polite bow and sat down.

While the boys were kept imprisoned in the Scholasticate during the educational year, Students were allowed a mid-year visit from their families after their third year, and the huge Refectory was filled with passionate reunions on these occasions. No other form of contact with the outside was allowed except for this visit. Perhaps this monastic isolation from the real world, combined with the long years of study, was the biggest reason for paying Students to leave the Guild before gaining a magical vocation.

Grimm sometimes had to fight tears when he saw the emotional embraces, and some other poor boys were sobbing openly, deprived like him of the least iota of familial warmth and love.

Also, unlike the paying boys, Grimm would not be entitled to home leave at the end of each year; Magemaster Crohn had explained that the likelihood of charity Students returning to the House to justify the Guild's investment after the depredations of the harsh regime was slim. Nonetheless, charity boys would be allowed to send and receive

letters from home at the end of their third year; this gave Grimm hope, and buoyed him up.

Madar seemed almost ebullient on visiting days, often elbowing Grimm and Argand to point out some physical or behavioural quirk in the visiting parents.

"Doesn't it bother you, Madar? Don't you miss your parents at all?" Grimm asked.

"I can hardly remember them," Madar replied with a cheerful grin. This seemed no brave pretence; Grimm's friend was telling the truth.

"My idea of fun is not sitting opposite my father while he tells me about his latest doxy and how well his business is going, while I know he's just counting the moments 'til he can go back home to his hoard and his mistress. My mother died when I was small. So no, I don't miss them in the slightest. What about you?"

"I didn't know either of my parents," Grimm said. "They both died of a fever when I was about two. I lived with Granfer and Gramma after that, and I'm not ashamed to admit that I do miss them sometimes. What about you, Argand?"

"I do miss my Da and Ma at times," Argand confessed, "but a few years away from my big sister Serah won't do me any harm. Come on, let's go and play marbles in the yard."

On his tenth birthday, Madar and Argand staged a small pageant in honour of their friend, and Grimm knew that he was truly home. He felt guilty that his memory of his grandparents' faces was fading, but he knew that in the year to come he would be able to receive letters from home, and to write back. Life was good.

Chapter 18: Messages From Home

Dear Granfer and Gramma,

Thank you very much for the lovely cake you sent me on my tenth birthday. It was very nice and I shared it with my friends Madar and Argand. They also enjoyed it. It is so good to be able to write you after all this time and I look forward to a letter from you.

I am doing well at runes and pretend spells and our mage master Kargan says I am good at singing. Magemaster Crohn is often fierce, but I do not think he really means it. I see him smile sometimes when he thinks nobody is looking.

Would you believe it, I am quite a good dancer now; even Magemaster Faffel has stopped hitting me with his stick. He is quite hard sometimes, so I am pleased. Madar is a good dancer; he helped me a lot.

I can play the lute a little bit now and I sang on stage as a minstrel a few weeks ago. Next year you can come to see me at the end of the term. I have lots and lots to tell you, but no space here.

Lots of love, Grimm

As Grimm was on his way back to his cell one night, he was intercepted by Doorkeeper and given the letter he had been waiting for. A communication from home, at last! He hustled to his cell and tore open the letter with clumsy, eager haste.

To his surprise, there were two different letters within the envelope, one signed by both his grandparents and one signed only by Granfer Loras. He read the latter epistle first.

My beloved grandson,

I hope this letter finds you as it leaves me. By now, you will know the truth about my former life, and I am deeply sorry that I did not tell you of this before, but you will appreciate that this is not a matter on which I can easily dwell.

Not even your grandmother knows of my past, and neither could I find it in me to tell your late father, my own son. I believe it is deep shame that drives me to hide the truth in this matter from those who know nothing of it.

However, now that I know that you know all too well what and who I was, I find it easy to write you these few lines. It is so good to

be able once more to speak of my past and to write frankly to my beloved grandson.

I am ashamed of what I once did, Grimm, and I hope that you can find it within yourself to face and to master the legacy of shame that I have left you. However, please believe that I did not send you to the Guild because I wanted you to absolve me by being a better mage than I was.

I believe with all my heart that a bright lad like you, with such power, would be wasted as an apprentice smith in a dull backwater like Lower Frunstock, and I know that only within the Guild will you find any kind of fulfilment.

I regret I will be unable to visit you at the end of the year, for obvious reasons, but your grandmother is counting the days, and my heart will travel with her.

I love you, and I am deeply proud of you.

Loras Afelnor, once Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, called the Firelord.

A lump filled Grimm's throat as he read the letter. Seeing his grandfather's full Guild style and cognomen, written in his own hand, brought home to him what the histories and remembrances relayed to him by the likes of Doorkeeper had not; Loras really had been among the most puissant of wizards, a wielder of the most destructive powers.

He had not always been the imperturbable, good-natured smith that was all Grimm could call to mind. Once, he had been a manipulator of arcane powers and a mage of the highest order. For too long now, Grimm had felt the weight of the shame transferred to him by that one, inexplicable, misguided act of Loras'. From this moment, he swore, he would persevere, taking inspiration from the man his grandfather had been before his downfall; a man widely liked and respected within the House and, until that day, one of its most potent magic-users.

Grimm knew the first letter had been for his eyes alone, and he tucked it inside his tunic. The second, much longer, letter was from both his grandparents and written in his grandmother's hand.

Dearest Grimm,

I would guess that, at this stage, you are finding it hard to imagine the apparent eternity of years that lie before you as in the Scholasticate, and I wish that your grandfather and I could come to see you, to express our love and pride for you in person.

Rest assured that we will both move heaven and earth to be with you at the end of the year, as soon as we are able.

Please keep a warm place in your heart for us, as we always shall for you, and never think for one moment that we ever wished to be

parted from you.

Borin and Mardel are asking after you and they begged you to visit when you are a mage dressed in fine robes. Poor boys; they miss you, too, and they have no idea of how long it takes to train a mage.

You will be pleased to know that Orel has finally married Aria. As a wedding present, your granfer made Orel a full partner in the smithy. Loras is not as young as he was and needs a hand with the heavy work, which Orel is happy to lend. Orel and Aria also send their love and hope that you are well...

The letter went on for several neatly-written pages more, and Grimm devoured the news of the home he had not seen for so long. He knew Loras could not have told Drima that he could never visit the House; at the end of the year, Grimm presumed, Granfer would have to make some excuse not to come. Grimm understood the reasons for the deception; Loras was banished forever from Guild premises, and to confess this would be to reveal his shameful past. Although he yearned to see Loras again, he understood why this was impossible.

He begged a piece of paper from Doorkeeper and began to pen a reply, in the full knowledge that all outgoing messages were subject to scrutiny before they were sent.

He had no desire to betray Loras's secret, even to his grandmother Drima, and he had to think long and hard about what to say. After much cogitation, he dipped his pen in the ink and began to write in his best cursive hand, only mastered after long and impatient tutelage by the acerbic Faffel.

Dear Granfer and Gramma,

Thank you very, very much for your welcome letter. I am glad that you are both well, and have managed to get a bigger piece of paper this time from Doorkeeper, who is a mage here.

My main teachers are Magemaster Kargan who teaches Runes, Singing and Presence and Magemaster Crohn, who teaches Power, Control and Magical Theory. I am doing well with these subjects, but some others like woodworking and Courtly Graces, I am not nearly so good at.

It was funny when I came here because Doorkeeper said there was once another boy here who looked just like me and almost had the same name. Isn't that strange? Other mages have said the same thing. He got to be a very good mage, and they called him Firelord, but he died young, so I have promised to live up to his memory by doing my very best and to study really hard.

I am very proud to be carrying on the memory of this other mage.

I have a little room of my very own called a cell. It is number 17 and it is not very much when you see what some of the rich boys have, but it is mine, and I am in it now.

The food is all right, and Madar and Argand are very rich and they get lots of good stuff and often give me some of theirs, which is very nice, though not as nice as yours.

I look forward to seeing you when you can come. I think of you always and I will read your last letter again and again to remind me of you, and our good times together in the smithy.

I have to practice some more singing tonight. Kargan says that the Firelord had a lovely voice and that I do, too, so that is all right.

Please say hello to Borrin and Mardel for me and tell them I will see them and you as soon as I become a proper mage with a staff and a ring. I will probably have a big beard by then and they will not recognise me.

Your loving grandson, Grimm Afelnor.

Grimm folded the letter over, wrote the address neatly on the other side and went to ask Doorkeeper to send it for him.

The letter from his grandparents had reawakened some pangs of homesickness in him, but, in replying, he had come to realise the good things in his life that he would never lose. The pride and love expressed in the letters gave him renewed strength.

He might still have to be alone in the Scholasticate at the end of the year, but there was always the Library to hold his interest, and his friends and family would still be with him, if only in spirit. He felt replete and blissfully happy.

Grimm found that the remainder of the year did not drag, as he had feared that it would. New subjects and extra studies filled his days and nights, and Magemaster Kargan always had a keen eye for slackers. Grimm continued to improve with his Courtly Graces, and he even won fourth prize in a woodwork competition, receiving a small plaque to hang in his cell. At least the plaque made the room seem a little more lived in, Grimm thought. Nonetheless, his mind was not as focused on his work as it might have been. He was looking forward to the winter break this year.

It was finally the end of Grimm's third year in the Scholasticate, and most of the paying boys had already said their goodbyes and left for home. For some weeks, Grimm had awaited his promised visit with aching eagerness, but by now he was beginning to grow desperate. The last vestiges of hope were beginning to fade when his attention was called by Magemaster Crohn.

"Afelnor; a visitor has come to the House from your former home. Remember that no other personal visit will be permitted for another three years, so make the most of it." This was classic Crohn-speech; blunt, unemotional and to the point.

"Enjoy this visit to the full, Afelnor, but please ensure you do not dishonour the Scholasticate with unseemly shows of passion. Some emotion is to be expected, but keep it within the bounds of decorum. Power and presence: remember that, above all."

Crohn softened his tone somewhat. "I am happy for you, Afelnor. You are a good Student, and I am sure that you will not let the House down. Enjoy your visit."

Grimm made his way to the assembly hall as quickly as House decorum allowed. What if he could not recognise his grandmother? Her face had already begun to fade from his memory. He need not have worried; in the centre of the hall she stood, looking little different from how he remembered her, except that she seemed to have shrunk a little. Forgetting Crohn's words for a moment, caught in the grip of emotion, he ran into her arms and hugged her. Tears flooded his eyes, and he felt quite unable to speak.

When his voice did recover, he managed to sob, "Oh, Gramma Drima, it is so good to see you. Thank you, thank you so much for coming here. I have been so looking forward to it."

Moisture twinkled in Drima's blue eyes, too, and her normally immaculate brown hair was a little tousled.

"Grimm," she said, her voice husky, "I wouldn't have missed coming here for the world. You have never been out of our hearts; never. I am only sorry that your Granfer took ill a few days ago and was unable to come."

"Our young apprentice, Jirrl-you remember him, I'm sure-brought me here. He's gone into town to try the local ale and will come back in an hour or so. Let me look at you-why, you're taller than I am now!"

Grimm, embarrassed, allowed himself to be held at arms' length and inspected by his grandmother whilst she assessed him. After a little chit-chat about his former hometown, which Grimm absorbed with rapt attention, Drima looked long and hard at her grandson.

"You haven't once enquired about your grandfather, Grimm," she said, and Grimm started. "You know he's not really ill, don't you?"

Grimm, unsure how to respond, gave only an uncomfortable shrug.

"Men!" Drima sighed. "They think their wives are blind or stupid, and they think they can hide their feelings so well."

Grimm said nothing.

"I am perfectly aware that Loras yearned to come here," she said, "but I always knew he would have to come up with some excuse or

other. He thinks I know nothing of his life before I met him, but he's a fool, for all his intelligence, like all men; a fool I love with all my heart.

"Once, I saw Loras fondling the ring he tried to keep hidden, and I knew its significance; what it means to him. He talks in his sleep, too, may the Names bless him. For most of our life together, I've kept up the patient pretence of knowing nothing. I've always known it would break his heart if he ever thought I knew of his disgrace: the mighty Guild Mage who fell from grace; the powerful Questor; the Oathbreaker.

"I know very little about the details, and I don't want to know.

"All I do know is that the Loras Afelnor I married, and whom I have loved for so many years, would never break a trust or a solemn vow unless he felt he had no choice."

Drima drew the stunned, wordless Grimm close and hugged him again.

"Whatever he may have done, I know he would only ever have acted for the best reasons," she said, holding Grimm in a firm, fierce embrace. "I want you to know that, too. If only you knew just how proud he is that you are a Student in his own Guild House! Sometimes, he almost seems to burst with pride when we tell people about you.

"We are both so proud of you, Grimm, and I know it is hard for you to be kept away from people who love you, but our hearts are with you always.

"The guilt Loras bears is not some trifling twinge that a habitual evil-doer might suffer, but the consuming, passionate pain of a good and honourable man who has been forced into something of which he is ashamed; something he cannot comprehend. Please work hard, and make the name of Afelnor shine again in the Guild. That would make both of us so happy."

Grimm's eyes filled with tears. He thought of his bear of a grandfather, a man who worked as hard as others half his age, but who was never too busy to listen to a child's questions or to soothe a hurt.

Often, Loras would refuse payment from poor people, or he would charge a price well below the going rate. It was Loras who would send anonymous parcels of food to people who had fallen on hard times; it was always he who was at the forefront of a search for a missing child. Such a man could not have an evil bone in his whole body, no matter the opprobrium placed on his name.

"Gramma," Grimm said, fighting strong emotions, "I love you both. I know that Granfer is a good man, and I will work hard to become a good mage. It is hard for me here sometimes, but it will be

worth it to make you proud of me."

"We're always proud of you, Grimm," Drima said, her voice hesitant and her eyes misty. "Just do your best; that will always be more than enough for us. You're a good boy, and we love you so much. All I ask is that you work hard, and please don't tell your Granfer that I know some of his secret. It would hurt him so much, and I know you would never want him to be hurt."

"Don't worry, Gramma," Grimm assured her, "I promise I won't say anything. I love Granfer as much as I love you. I wouldn't say anything to hurt him for all the world."

"In that case, Grimm, I don't think we need to say any more on the subject, do we? Please; do tell me about your friends and your teachers."

"Oh, Gramma," giggled Grimm, "you should know by now that they aren't called teachers, they're called Magemasters."

"I have two good friends that I wrote about in my letters. One day last month, we started a new game here. It's called Scaffle-ball, and everyone's playing it now..."

A whole hour passed whilst Grimm and his doting grandmother exchanged news. When Magemaster Crohn came to tell them that the audience was at an end, Grimm was surprised; it seemed as if only a few scant minutes had passed. The boy hugged his grandmother in a tight embrace and whispered, "I'll remember, Gramma. You can rely on me. I love you all."

Drima whispered back, with tears in her eyes, "We love you, too, Grimm. It may take a long time, but we know you will do your best. If you ever become sad, think of us. You can be sure we'll be thinking of you."

A heartfelt kiss, and the visit was over. Grimm went to his cell and read his grandparents' letters for a while, drawing sustenance from the pages through his tearful eyes until the Refectory bell tolled its insistent chime. Eating seemed a chore, and he went to bed with a barely-satisfied stomach, but with a full heart.

For the remainder of the winter break, he confined most of his reading to serious subjects. He studied the four main classifications of spells: Perceptive, Manipulative, Transformative and Translocative. The standard work recommended by Crohn was Thrimal and Thring's Principles of Thaumaturgy, and he devoured the dull tome with an intensity and interest he had never known before; he would make the Afelnor name shine again. When the new year began, he would work as he never had before.

Chapter 19: Defiance

Another year passed in almost frenzied activity, and another. Three more boys left and more study subjects were added, such as Basic Herbalism and Patterning. Grimm found himself with little time to think or meditate, and he only managed to keep pace with considerable effort.

The Students' days were now so full of different studies that there was little time for petty animosities, and, since most of the boys were now skilled at one discipline or another, dissatisfaction and envy were dimmed. However, the reverse of this coin was that there was now little time even for friendships. Grimm's study and play sessions with Madar and Argand suffered accordingly, as they argued about which subject to pursue.

These arguments were normally nipped in the bud by the even-handed but ever more muscular Argand before they became too heated.

Grimm began to wonder, however, why the magical studies taught by Crohn and Kargan, which once had been foremost amongst the class's subjects, were now swamped by the more mundane disciplines of Courtly Decorum, Poetry and Languages.

The Students still practiced ever more complex 'spells' under Kargan, and Crohn still gave his monologues on the classifications and variations of magic, but they seemed to spend far longer with Faffel than with the other two Magemasters. Frustration grew as time went on, until one day when Madar nudged Grimm in class before Crohn's arrival.

"Grimm, we're all fed up with this courtly stuff," the redhead declared. "Crohn seems to like you a bit better than some of us, so why don't you ask him when we'll start learning some real magic? You're good with words; I bet you could put it better than we could."

Several other boys concurred, and Grimm felt flattered that they would accept him as their spokesman. Once, he would never have dreamed of speaking up to the Senior Magemaster, but he had grown in confidence since his fight with Shumal Tolarin.

"All right, I'll do it," he replied, with rather more self-assurance than he felt. "You lot had better back me up if he explodes, though." A vigorous series of nods decided the matter.

Three taps on the floor announced Crohn's arrival, as usual.

"Gentlemen," Crohn boomed, "this afternoon, we will explore the thaumic resonances of runic groups of the Second and Third Families when combined...

"Yes, Afelnor, what is it?"

Grimm rose to his feet and stood before Crohn, his head lowered in a respectful attitude. The black-robed Magemaster towered over the boy like some huge crow.

"Lord Mage, I am sure that we all appreciate the wisdom and learning you give us," he began, trying to be as diplomatic and deferential as possible.

From the corner of his eye, Grimm saw Madar give a slight but definite nod of approval, as if to say, "That's right, Grimm; butter the old fool up first!"

"I am sure that is not all you wish to say to me, Afelnor." Crohn's voice was as cool as ice. "Out with it, Student."

Grimm licked his lips with a tongue that felt as dry as cured leather. "Lord Mage; we, that is, I," he stammered, "feel we might all learn a little better if we were actually shown how to do some... some real, practical magic, instead of just learning theory all the time."

Crohn moved to glower over the boy, who paled a little, trying to stand tall and unbowed before the Magemaster's baleful gaze.

Crohn's tone was low, often a sign of impending fury. "One answer, Afelnor," he said in clipped, curt tones, "is that the Scholasticate curriculum has been developed over many decades, indeed centuries, by heads far wiser than yours. A shorter reason is that I am the Senior Magemaster, and you are not!"

"How dare you presume yourself more knowledgeable than those who are your elders and betters? Perhaps you would prefer to complete your education as a cook's drudge or a scullery-boy? Believe you me, Afelnor, this can be arranged with ease!"

Inwardly, Grimm quailed, but he stood his ground. "If you will it, Lord Mage, then so be it," he said, willing his voice not to tremble. "May I please be allowed to speak my mind?"

Crohn's eyes opened wide, and Grimm realised that he had delivered his words in a soprano version of the Magemaster's own voice, with not a trace of tremulousness. However, Crohn maintained his irate appearance and gave a grave, curt nod.

"Pray continue, Student."

"Lord Mage," Grimm said, determined to maintain the correct, formal speech expected of a potential mage; he was certain this was the only way to persuade Crohn of the depths of the malaise and exhaustion that had subsumed his companions and him.

"I intended no disrespect or impertinence, Lord Mage. I do, however, feel that we would better appreciate and understand what we are taught if we were given a practical demonstration from time to time. As to whether I should be punished for my beliefs... well, I am in your hands."

A gnat scratching its nose could have been heard within the

classroom, but the silence seemed to thunder with implied applause from the other Students.

Crohn felt nonplussed by Afelnor's little speech, delivered with such self-assurance. The unyielding intensity in the boy's dark eyes was somewhat unnerving in one so young. It reminded Crohn of Loras Afelnor's steely Questor's gaze...

"And is this the opinion of all of you?" he asked, as much to fill the silence as for any other reason. The red-headed boy, Gaheela, raised his hand in affirmation, and most of the other boys followed suit. Crohn felt as if his eyes might fly from his head at any moment, striking some boy in the manner of a pair of his infamously accurate chalk projectiles. He knew he should not let such apparent mutiny go unpunished. Yet could he punish the whole class for an honest and forthright request?

What did the Afelnor boy demand that was so unreasonable? he wondered. I cannot respond just by saying that this is the way things are because this is how they have always been.

"Very well," he said, after a long pause, "but you are not, I repeat not, to take this as a sign of some new, benign order. I will not be cozened or bullied, is that quite clear?"

"Quite clear, Lord Mage!" the Students chorused. Crohn did not fail to notice the broad smiles on the faces of several of the Students, but he chose to ignore the fact.

"I want it clearly understood," Crohn said, "that you will learn spell-casting only when your appointed Magemasters decide and not before, and that is an absolute.

"As for a demonstration, attend."

Crohn stood before the class and steepled his hands. A chant similar to many the class had been taught rose from his lips, and a faint blue light began to coruscate around him.

Crohn could feel the normal mage's tracery of fine, yellow threads being drawn into his head, coalescing into a solid, golden mass as it did so. All of the mage's will and power had been directed to one end.

Slowly, the Magemaster rose into the air, still chanting, concentration etched in his face. He turned twice end over end, like a taper twirled in the fingers, and then descended again, landing on his feet. With a sigh, the Magemaster allowed the threads of power to disperse once more throughout his aura. He felt a distinct ripple of pleasure run through his body at the success of the complex spell he had just cast to perfection.

A ripple of applause rose from the class, with several muted cheers, and Crohn had to resist the urge to bow.

He cleared his throat to cover his confusion, regaining his accustomed pose as a cold, emotionless master of his own will. He

turned his habitual, stern gaze on the Students, in control again.

"A relatively simple, even frivolous, use of the craft," he barked. "Some of you, if taught too much in too short a time, would be tempted to try the spell yourselves; in truth, most of you lack sufficient power and all of you lack sufficient control.

"Know you that, had I transposed the runes Het and Terva in the fourth stanza, I would have slammed into the ground with great force instead of spinning gracefully in the air. I might have sustained considerable injury, not to mention embarrassment, had I made the least error in my casting.

"As another example, had I given the third instance of the rune Sha in the second stanza a straight downward inflection instead of an initial rising cadence, I should have hurtled upwards and through the ceiling and doubtless injured myself even more."

"I would also be guilty of the offence of wilful destruction of House property, since I would have been held accountable for attempting a spell without sufficient preparation." Crohn punctuated this dry statement with a stern gaze that swept the room like the beam of a lighthouse.

"Even I, a Mage of the Seventh Rank, am not immune from such strictures. The least hesitation in the execution of the tertiary cadence would have given an unpredictable response, ranging from simple failure to my transportation to an unknown location, such as a desert or even the bottom of an ocean."

Crohn turned to Grimm. "Should any other of this class seek to question Scholasticate rules, he may well find himself at the bottom of an ocean, Afelnor; remember that. You may sit down."

Grimm returned to his seat, a little red-faced, but with the trace of a relieved smile on his face. He received appreciative nods from several of the boys. Crohn carried on as if nothing had happened, choosing to overlook this brief insurrection.

"The craft is not for the dilettante, or for the casual experimenter," he said. "A more powerful spell, if misremembered or miscast, could well endanger the very soul of the caster. A miscast Healing may kill the patient or the caster. Failed Weatherworking may inundate the land or bring vicious tempests.

"For this reason, we test your ability to remember faithfully each chant, and to be able to reproduce it again and again, without the least error in cadence and pitch, no matter what diversions or frustrations are placed in your path. We teach you to see your own powers and to control them with ruthless efficiency in all circumstances.

"Each of these facets will go towards making spell-casters of those of you who have the gift, but you will not be taught how to link the

two aspects of magic together until you have proven your talent.

"Some of you will be called to another magical vocation, such as Scribing or Seeing, without ever being taught how to cast a simple spell. Only those of you who show the responsible attitude and rigorous application necessary for true magery will be given the secret.

"Should any here not be prepared to study what is allotted by the Magemasters, he may declare himself and leave now; for he has evidently neither the patience nor the diligence required of an Acclaimed mage. You will not be given further demonstrations of magic, gentlemen, and I will tolerate no further questioning of Scholasticate policy. You have had your fun, but it is over. I will not hesitate to discipline any Student who seeks a repeat performance. This is not a democracy, gentlemen. Either you accept the rules and strictures placed upon you, or you may consider a vocation outside this establishment."

Crohn folded his arms and glared at the Students. "Is there any boy here who will not give of his all, without question and without complaint? If so, you may speak now and save both of us much wasted effort and frustration."

The boys looked at the floor and made no reply. Crohn allowed uncomfortable silence to hang over the room like a funeral pall.

"That is well," the Magemaster intoned at last. "Now, if we have all had our fun, perhaps we may explore the thaumic resonances of runic groups of the Second and Third Families when combined with root tones..."

Chapter 20: The Broken Instrument

Self-control and discipline; these had become the new mantras, the new watchwords for Grimm's class. Again and yet again, the boys practiced writing and chanting of the most obscure and complex spells under all kinds of conditions.

Sometimes Kargan would burst a paper bag behind a boy engaged in a chant. On one occasion, the boys took it in turns to intone chants in which they were proficient, whilst being spun around in a rotating chair and suddenly stopped at irregular intervals. Many boys became nauseous, and several vomited. Only a few, including Grimm, managed to hold on to their senses and the contents of their stomachs long enough to complete the chant with sufficient control and attention to detail. Grimm studied meditation techniques in the Library, so as to allow the divorce of his mind from his body at these times; these exercises proved very useful.

Even the bullies of Grimm's year were pent by this constant discipline, as, where the Magemasters had once overlooked various infringements including the sporting of fight injuries, now they pounced on the least infraction with ruthless severity. Should any boy enter the class bearing inexplicable bruises, the Magemasters used Divination spells to ascertain the reason for this, and they were liberal with their punishments.

Shumal and Ruvin now left Grimm alone, preferring to pick on Students in lower years.

At one point, Argand caught Shumal tormenting a first-year Student and beat the bully without mercy, but he was careful to leave no marks that would be visible to the Magemasters. After pointing out to the prostrate Shumal that, next time, he would be given a black eye and a broken nose despite the risk of punishment, even Shumal took a sabbatical from his unpleasant activities. If the Magemasters had performed a Divination on him in such circumstances and discovered his bullying of smaller boys, he would surely be dismissed from the House, and he seemed aware of this fact. Some of the boys told Grimm that Shumal's father was a more brutal bully than his son, although the charity lad could not bring himself to pity his enemy. Nonetheless, even Shumal's wings seemed to have been clipped.

"Now, Afelnor, you will demonstrate to the class the correct form of the secondary type of Joining spell for a round, inanimate object in no more than five fragments," Kargan drawled to the twelve-year-old Grimm, who was now almost as tall as the Magemaster.

Grimm composed himself and stood before the class. He knew the exercise well, but he worried that he might have difficulties with the higher notes. For some weeks, he had had to struggle to reach notes that he had sung on previous occasions without the least trouble. He felt sure that this was some passing minor malady, and he began to sing.

"Churaah, aharantai, khohauugh nimaimetooreh..." Grimm broke off in confusion, as his voice descended to a ludicrous bass, rose to an off-key croak and then sank again on the last three syllables. A peal of laughter burst from the class, and, for once, Kargan did not admonish them.

"Perdition on it!" Kargan sighed, adding: "I should have had you bloody castrated last year!"

Grimm felt by no means certain that Kargan's words were given in jest.

The Magemaster drew another deep sigh. "I expected that voice to last you at least for another year. Oh, well; once the instrument is broken, it cannot be mended again. You will just have to learn to cope with the new one, which I hope serves you as well. Gaheela! May I prevail upon you to lead the class in this chant for a little while? I need a private word with our newly disharmonious friend, Afelnor."

Numb with shock, Grimm allowed Kargan to lead him into the corridor, while Madar ran through the same spell-chant with the other Students, his voice ringing out in its customary, clear treble.

Closing the classroom door behind him, the Magemaster laid an almost paternal hand on Grimm's shoulder, as the boy fought to control hot tears. For once, the Magemaster's usual boisterous manner was absent, and he seemed almost like a normal human being.

"It was a fine instrument, boy," Kargan said, leaning close to Grimm's ear, "one of the finest I have ever heard, but it would be a great shame were you to reach my age with the same voice. Imagine if I were to stand before you, stern and forbidding, and then declaim in a dulcet soprano!"

Grimm laughed in a hoarse, scratchy tone. Then he became serious again. "Lord Mage, will this affect my chances of progressing further? What if I can never sing again?"

Kargan shook his head. "All men, including the greatest of Acclaimed mages, have been through this, Afelnor. It is part of becoming a man, and even the mightiest mage has had to cope with the change in voice sooner or later.

"In your case, it is sooner, so you will have plenty of time to gain the measure of your new voice before you are shown how to cast spells. For some of the others, it will be far more difficult; indeed, we do not consider advancing a boy to the level of spell-casting until he has attained his adult voice and learned to control it.

"For now, you must practice, practice and practice again with your new voice until it fits you. Most boys are admonished for singing in the halls, but I will allow a special dispensation for you to sing at any time out of class, of which I shall inform the other Magemasters. You will not be punished, except for singing at inappropriate times and places, such as during a study period or an Observance."

Grimm nodded, not trusting his vocal chords with a spoken response, as a peal of laughter arose from the class.

Kargan said: "We will go back into class now, for it sounds as if a herd of wild boar has been let loose in there. I suppose it is time for some semblance of order to be imposed once more. Promise you will not give up working with your man's voice, Afelnor. You will be a man soon; do not regret it."

Still not trusting himself to speak, Grimm nodded again to the Magemaster and followed him back into the classroom, his head bowed.

Kargan seemed to grow in stature, and the familiar, manic grimace came over his face as he flung the door open in his normal, energetic way.

"Right!" he yelled. "That's enough of that! We will revisit the charm of Mage Light in its third form. Trune, you loathsome toad, be so good as to demonstrate the chant, if you can bear to drag yourself from your slothful reverie..."

The relentless tutoring went on as if nothing had happened.

During the evening meal, Madar and Argand joined Grimm in the refectory.

"What did old Kargan say to you outside the class, Grimm?" Madar asked, his eyes wide and earnest.

Feeling a little less self-conscious talking to his friends, Grimm spoke in a hoarse croak: "He told me to practice until I can sing again. It's not very encouraging, though, Madar. It feels as if I had a pineapple stuck in my throat. I sound like a bloody donkey."

Madar gave a soothing, understanding nod, and Argand said,

"Well; I must be more mature than you, because my voice hasn't broken yet, and I already manage to sound like a donkey."

They all laughed, and Madar added, "You're flattering yourself, Argand. I'd shoot a donkey that made the racket you do."

A feeble sally, but they all laughed anew, and Grimm's laughter was as loud as that of his friends; he recognised that the sounds of his mirth bore a distinct resemblance to the braying of an ass.

Madar said "My father always moans about the loss of the fine voice he says he had as a boy, but he is first baritone in our local choir. He would easily be able sing our chants, and, so will you, once you have mastered your new voice.

"I guess the main thing is that your ear hasn't changed, so you'll be harder on yourself than any Magemaster could be. In no time, I bet you'll be leading the class in singing again. Even though you sound awful now." Grimm lightly punched Madar in the arm, and the redhead pretended to tremble with fear at the assault.

Argand mused for a moment, and said, "I think I can see why they won't let us try to cast anything. I bet they wait 'til your voice's broken; the chance of a miscast is too great otherwise. What if your voice broke in the middle of a Fire spell?" He shook his head. "The consequences don't bear thinking about. You could burn down the whole Scholasticate!" He grinned. "It might not be such a bad idea, after all!"

They all laughed again, and Grimm felt better than he had at the start of the meal.

Later, in his cell, he started to work his voice again, at first quietly, then louder, as some measure of confidence returned. It still sounded awful, but he was getting the feel of it now. He carried on with ever-increasing volume until the older boy in the next cell demanded that Grimm shut up so he could sleep.

The novelty of Grimm's new voice wore off after a few days. Within a week, he had some control at least over his normal speaking voice, although singing was still a major problem.

After a few months more, several other boys' voices began to break, and Grimm was no longer alone in his affliction. Indeed, those whose voices remained high and childish began to be the butt of humour, the more so when Grimm and others began to sport beards of one kind or another.

The boys were allowed to wear beards, on the condition that they were maintained in good order. Grimm's beard grew like a patchy black bush, and he had to spend an inordinately long time tending and grooming it each day. It was a badge of manhood to be worn with pride; many of the other boys could muster only a sparse sprinkling of downy fluff on their cheeks.

Crohn warned of growing physical urges that might afflict the boys, and he taught them further meditation exercises to overcome the problem.

Stern lectures were given on vague subjects such as "pollution of the body and mind"-this 'pollution' was never defined in any specific detail-and "unnatural abuses". Any boy caught giving in to these urges would be dismissed at once, since it was evident that such people did not have the mastery of will necessary to become mages. Most of the Students feigned bafflement at what these practices might be, but the stern and imperturbable Crohn seemed remarkably reticent on the subject. All noted with glee his stammer and his red face when any Student pressed him on the matter, as they often did. For once, they had found a chink in the formidable Magemaster's armour, and they assaulted it with ruthless, boyish cruelty at every opportunity.

Kargan told the boys that those who had already found and mastered their adult voices would be but a step away from being considered for early elevation to the rank of Neophyte, with all the advantages and privileges the title bestowed. The possible rewards of advancement, when compared to the prospect of remaining a humble Student for another two years gave Grimm the determination to persevere with his new, unmelodious voice.

At times, he believed that he had gained full control of his wayward vocal cords, especially when he had carried a tune or a chant to the end without any error. However, on many occasions, when tasked by Kargan to attempt a more difficult chant, Grimm would find that his voice betrayed him at some critical juncture. At these times, Kargan would sigh and give a small shake of the head. At least Grimm was more fortunate than Madar, who all but lost his splendid voice in its entirety; for a while, he was quite inconsolable. All he could offer was a breathy growl in place of his once excellent treble.

Argand was luckiest of all. His voice descended in short order to an impressive, booming bass register, although it was no more tuneful than before. He also grew prodigious amounts of hair on his face, chest and arms to the envy of many other boys and, his beard was stronger, faster-growing and more complete than those of the other boys. A beard was the mark of a man in the Scholasticate, and it was clear Argand was a boy no longer. Whilst Grimm's beard grew quickly

enough, it refused to take root around the pale margins of his lower lip, a constant frustration to him.

Shumal and Ruvin, who still swaggered around the Scholasticate like arrogant twins, seemed to be bound together even in the matter of bodily maturity. They retained their soprano voices, smooth skin and puppy fat long after Grimm had mastered both his beard and his new voice. This reduced their menacing presence even more in his eyes. With new respect from the less mature boys, Grimm felt that he was becoming accepted almost as an equal by the rest of the class.

At last, the day came when Kargan pronounced himself satisfied that Grimm had regained full control of his singing; the Student now possessed a voice capable of ranging from a smooth baritone to a confident tenor. Grimm did not feel that it was nearly as good as his former, cut-glass treble had been, but, at least, he had to acknowledge that he could sing in tune again.

By now, many more boys had lost their soprano voices and were struggling themselves, and Grimm felt some inner satisfaction at this. Madar was still having a bad time of it, and Grimm had often to console his friend and encourage him to persevere.

"Come on, Madar, it's not the end of the world. You always said singing was a chore, anyway. It's just a bit more of a chore now."

"I lied," Madar croaked. "Music was the one thing I was really good at. Bugger it! My old man'd be laughing his head off if he knew." He was close to tears, something that Grimm had never seen before in his self-confident friend.

"Oh, just go on doing your creaking-door imitation if you want to, then!" Grim snapped. "It's something we've all got to get through, Madar. Stop moaning and practice; otherwise your old man'll really have a reason to laugh."

"Oh all right then, Grimm, I'll have a go at it, but only 'cause you asked," Madar grumbled. "I just hate Kargan's idea of having to go around in my free time, caterwauling like a reject from the Royal Academy of Useless Bards."

On the other hand, Argand's voice improved by a considerable amount, although the finer nuances of the most difficult chants were still as a closed book to him. Due to his considerable artistic and calligraphic talents, he was given extra tuition in Scribing, and his vocation appeared settled. Argand was the first of Grimm's year to be

declared a Neophyte, much to everybody's surprise.

Grimm was now given individual training in the summoning and holding of power, although still without any direct application to spellcasting. This gave him great satisfaction; not least for the fact that the tutoring sessions took him away from the class increasingly often. He had been placed under the personal tuition of Magemaster Crohn, who trusted him to study as he was bidden when the Senior Magemaster was absent. Madar, having gained at last full control of his new voice, was placed under Magemaster Kargan. The boys enjoyed the arrangement, because they only met the Magemasters for a few minutes a day to be assigned study topics and to receive work assessments. The new class Magemaster was the taciturn and sarcastic Magemaster Faffel, so Grimm was heartily glad that he and Madar only had to join the rest of the class for Herbalism, music, dancing and the other non-magical activities.

Chapter 21: Neophyte

Crohn placed a feather on the table in front of Grimm. The Magemaster and his pupil were sitting on uncomfortable, tall stools in a bleak, unheated room in a deserted part of the Scholasticate. It was a cold winter day, and Grimm wished he were almost anywhere else.

"Make the chant of Levity for light objects in the third instance," Crohn commanded. With the ease born of endless practice, Grimm produced the necessary singsong chant. Nothing happened.

"You see," Crohn said, "the chant does not speak to the feather. To what should it speak?"

"To my mind," Grimm replied, suppressing the urge to sneeze. "The chant is not the spell, but a device to pattern my mind and my power to achieve the desired effect."

"That is correct, as far as your answer goes," Crohn said. "The textbook answer, if a little glib. Nonetheless, however suitable rote learning may be as an aid to memory, it is no substitute for true understanding. Let us see what more you can deduce. You have already learnt to see another's power, and you know how it changes form when turned to true magic. You must learn to feel your own power so that you can allow the chant to shape it for the spell. It is not sufficient to control and gather your power as you have done before. The chant must be directed to the power, the power to the effect, and the effect to the object. Watch me, and pay attention to my aura."

Crohn made the chant as Grimm had done, and Grimm noticed how the lines of power in Crohn's aura waved and twisted in exact counterpoint to the spell as they coalesced to a vibrating mass. Then a thin stream of golden light, which would have been invisible outside the dim cubicle, wound towards the feather. With smooth grace, the feather rose off the table as the chant ended.

"Notice that I must divert only the smallest portion of my will towards the feather once the magic is cast," Crohn said. "Once floating, the feather wishes to remain where it is. To all extents, I can now ignore the feather. This is made easier because the feather has a natural desire to float; this spell, in the tertiary form, is designed to take advantage of this. The first form is, of course, for objects that do not bear the signature of buoyancy or levity. The second is for repulsion, and requires the constant application of force."

Grimm nodded. He had been told this on many previous occasions.

"Observe, Afelnor," said Crohn, "I now relinquish the spell."

Crohn's aura became neutral, and the feather fluttered back to the

table. "Now, you try. Try to feel the spell patterning your mind as it did mine."

Grimm started the chant, which was clear in his mind. At the same time, he began to feel the twists and turns of the spell. Remembering what the Magemaster had done, he tried to will the speckles of his power first into lines and then to move in unison with the chant. On the first chant, nothing happened and his head spun a little. He tried again, looking inwards to the depths of his mind. He felt convinced that the feather must move, but it remained firmly table-bound. On the third repetition, he felt his mind split in two, one part focused on a future vision of the rising feather and the other drawing the power into ordered lines inside him.

With an internal hot rush, he felt the lines of power coalesce from the sparkling motes. A giddy sensation filled his head, and he tried to force the lines into the spell's pattern. He felt the power build and mass within his body, but it was too fast and too strong. Struggling to marshal the careering sensations within him, he began to lose control of the spell: the feather rose two inches from the floor, trembled and fell back, although there was no breeze within the room.

Still, the chant echoed and rang in his head, growing louder and louder in his skull to an unbearable volume. In desperation, he aborted the chant, feeling nausea well up inside him. He leant, heaving, against the wall, his forehead beaded with cold sweat and bitter bile rising in his throat. He clutched his throbbing temples to try to quell the sensation.

"Excellent!" Crohn gushed with rare enthusiasm. "You have just had your first glimpse of real magic, Afelnor. You have also learnt that it is not good to abort a casting in midstream. Should you ever do this again, it is advisable to attempt the first instance of the spell of Nullity. This is, as you know, a short chant, but it is necessary to pattern your mind with it, as with any other spell."

"I found it hard to abandon the spell, Lord Mage," Grimm said. "It seemed to grow louder and more insistent in my head."

Crohn nodded. "That is what we call a 'spell resonance'. Your problem there was that you tried to use too much power, and your first instinct was to cut your power before you had closed off the spell. Remember; to cast a spell, one first gathers power and then commences the chant. In order to complete a spell, the caster must continue to apply power until the chant is finished.

"Resonance is most probable where the caster cannot control the power pouring from him; be on your guard for this, Afelnor. In extreme cases, a mage may become irretrievably caught inside a spell, sometimes with fatal results. You only needed to move a feather, not an albatross; such powers are still far beyond your capacity to control.

Try again. This time, gather only a fraction of the power within yourself. See the effort required for the spell, and try to let the spell do the work. Once more, Neophyte."

Grimm stood upright, fighting nausea, and tried to repeat the spell with only a little power. This time, he felt his mind patterning to the chant and tried to direct a thin trickle of the patterned energy towards the feather. Just as he became convinced he was deluding himself, the power rushed from him in a torrent. The feather shot off the table and burst through the ceiling, sprinkling the Neophyte and his Magemaster with a shower of fine barbels ripped from the feather. Grimm blinked in amazement but managed to complete the chant before he cut off the energy stream. He then sneezed loudly, several times.

"Weapons training is not a normal part of a Neophyte's training, Afelnor," was Crohn's laconic comment. "You really need to work on the control of your power. You have considerable energy within you; indeed, a remarkable amount. You hold it in check quite well, but your control of the release of it leaves more than a little to be desired. However, I must congratulate you on your control of the spell, if not the energy."

"May I stop now, Lord Mage?" Grimm pleaded, feeling a deep ache in his head and his long bones. "I am suddenly very tired." Grimm began to see coruscating spots before his eyes and fought to maintain his equilibrium.

"I will give you some more potent meditation and relaxation exercises for you to practice in your cell," Crohn said. "Work on them with diligence, so that next time you do not injure yourself or me. Do not, under any circumstances, be tempted to practice any spells except when you are in tuition. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Lord Mage." Grimm had no intention of risking another spell resonance or worse.

"With the power you possess," the Magemaster continued, "the consequences of a miscast or garbled spell could be frightening. I want you to promise me you will not attempt the least spell, except in my presence. The temptation is too much for many Neophytes, and they may suffer grave consequences for their youthful folly. In the realm of Thaumaturgy, a casual dilettante is a dangerous liability."

Crohn rubbed his chin. "I have decided not to place you under a spell of Compulsion at this time," he said. "Such a spell removes free will and the necessity for the self-discipline I expect from a Neophyte. As your studies progress, however, I may find it necessary to impose such a restriction upon you."

Grimm gave a solemn, heartfelt oath that he would do no more than think about the day's learning and read his notes. Crohn wrote

some instructions in a combination of plain text and runes on a piece of parchment, which he handed to Grimm.

"You are dismissed. Go and rest before recreation."

When Grimm reached his cell, his mind reeled at what he had learned and the power he had released. Despite his wheeling thoughts, he fell quickly asleep after a cursory review of Crohn's notes, surrendering to the deep torpor within him. It was a sensation with which he would become familiar in the succeeding days.

After a further month of daily two-hour sessions, Grimm was able to control the feather as required, at will and on demand. He moved on to others of the Minor Magics, and he began to develop a feel for the object to be affected, so as to be able to divert just enough energy to bring about the desired change.

When his sessions with Crohn were finished, he moved on to other lessons. He found Herbalism fascinating, and he was a quick study. He still found Courtly Graces somewhat difficult, but even Magemaster Faffel did not fail to note that Grimm was making rapid progress. Music, as ever, was a blessed release, and Grimm quickly became the skilful player of a number of instruments, preferring the intimate embrace of stringed instruments such as the viol and the chitarra.

Grimm felt a new confidence in his step as he moved around the Scholasticate. He spent much of his spare time in the Library, looking in ancient librams and magical treatises, and he was allowed to keep irregular times in the Refectory so he could find convenient points at which to adjourn his studies. He found great pleasure at being able to ignore the strident, nagging Refectory bell, although he needed to locate a Magemaster or Adept who might open the Refectory door for him.

He spent little time in the recreation yard with the other boys, and he bore dark circles around his eyes and a pallid complexion: these, he learned, were the signs of the diligent Neophyte. Despite his

gruelling work schedule, he felt happy and content, feeling that he was making slow but steady progress towards the coveted ring and staff of a true Guild Mage.

One afternoon, he decided to take a brisk stroll around the yard during the daily recreation period instead of his habitual hour in the Library. He was joined by Madar, now sporting a healthy growth of russet beard and in full control of a firm baritone voice.

"Grimm, wait!" Madar cried. "Don't you have any time these days for your old friends?"

Grimm started and turned to face Madar. "Oh, I'm sorry, Madar, I didn't notice you," he said in a distant voice. "It's really good to see you. I do keep meaning to take time to see you and Argand, but this Neophyte business is hard work, and I don't keep standard hours."

The redhead snorted. "It looks like it, too, Grimm. You look like death warmed up-or even death cooled down. You need to get some fresh air and good food; not the slop they give you in the Refectory. You know I'd be only too happy to give you some of my goodies."

"You are good to me, Madar, and I do appreciate that so much," Grimm replied with heartfelt intensity. "I'd really love to meet up and talk over old times, and I will, I promise. I can't make it tonight, I'm afraid; I have some spells to practice for tomorrow. And don't worry too much about my victuals; I'm allowed better food now, although not quite as good as the food you used to share with me."

"The phrase, 'used to', sounds awfully final, Grimm," Madar said. "Which slave-driver's pushing you right now?"

"Magemaster Crohn."

"That bloody tyrant! I'm not surprised you look as you do. Argand's a Neophyte, too, of course, and he's studying to become a Scribe under Dothan, who's no bundle of laughs either. You remember when we had him for Interpretation when Kargan was away?" He grimaced.

"Oh, Crohn isn't as bad as he seems when you get to know him," Grimm said. "But, if I want to become a Reader, I've really got to work at it. It'll be all worth it when I'm Acclaimed."

"Come on, now, Grimm! A Reader? False modesty sits ill on you; you've got to be considering Weatherworker at least, surely!"

Grimm smiled. In truth, he did expect to become more than a Reader, the lowest rung on the ladder of Magedom. "All right, Madar. If I want even to become a Reader."

Madar smiled. "That's the Afelnor I thought I knew. So, Grimm, how does magic really work? What do you do all day?"

Grimm felt a tight band form around his head; now that his spell-studies were at such an advanced stage, Crohn had decided to place a Compulsion on him, after all: a spell that prevented him from

revealing what he had learned. Although it irked him a little that the Magemaster did not trust him to keep his mouth shut, the Neophyte knew only too well that it might be dangerous to satisfy his friend's curiosity.

"I can't tell you, Madar. No, look, I mean it; I can't tell you, even if I want to. I'm under a bloody Compulsion Crohn put on me, and you can guess how powerful that is. All I can say is that now I really understand why they're so secretive about this.

"Look, Madar, how about you and me and Argand getting together tomorrow in the Refectory, so we can chew over old times, if not old food? I've got a couple of free hours in the evening, too, and I'll be in my cell if you want to stop by. It'd make a real change for me, and I'd really enjoy it."

"It's a date," Madar said with warm sincerity. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. I'll be seeing Argand in the refectory tonight, and I'll see if he's free tomorrow night. I surely hope so, because I don't get to see much of him, either, these days."

The two Neophytes shook hands, and Grimm had to rush off; he knew Crohn wouldn't take kindly to him being late for his evening session.

"So, Argand, how do you like it as a Neophyte?" Grimm asked the next day.

"Well, my arm aches from pushing a quill over the paper all day, and the hours are long, but Dothan isn't anything like old Crohn. If I've done well, at least he tells me so."

"I always heard Dothan was a bit of a tyrant," Madar said. "I was talking to some of the boys that had him as Magemaster, and none of them has a kind word for him."

"It's true he doesn't have much love for snotty Students who think they know it all," Argand responded. "But he says he feels he's doing worthwhile work when he trains a Neophyte who really wants to learn.

"He certainly lets me know it if I miss out a curlicue or joining line when I'm Scribing, but he's patient and doesn't hammer the point home. The difficult thing is that Dothan's a great mimic. He can reproduce any regional accent you care to name, and he tends to switch accents in mid-chant, which causes no end of problems for me. Imagine 'effuther' in Frasian! It comes out like 'afforthe' and, unless the

spell context is clear, you can get into all sorts of trouble trying to join the runes up. The runes themselves are easy enough; after all, they're only the usual straight lines. But the joining cadences link the spell together, so if you get it wrong you end up with nothing, or worse."

"But you can't link 'affa', 'ore' and 'thek' together smoothly unless you change the pitch; there'd be a 'quack' in the middle-you couldn't miss it," Madar protested.

"When you're a Student, the Magemasters chant at one-tenth the speed of real mages, Madar. The 'quack' would be gone before you had time to register it."

Argand looked frustrated, as if he had a little difficulty in conveying his thoughts. "All the chants you two have ever met are standard ones. Scribes have to cope with all sorts of new chants.

"Imagine some Scholar has come up with a new spell, and he wants it recorded. It could take hours at Student speeds; he wants it scribed and notarised as soon as possible, so his work is recognised and rewarded without delay. These Scholars are famous for their impatience and not always as careful with their diction or tone as Readers are."

Grimm frowned. "Surely, Scholars go through the same repetition and chanting practice as the rest of us. After all, even they were Students and Neophytes once."

Argand grimaced. "Unfortunately, Scholars rarely cast spells," he said. "Unlike Readers, who strive for perfection to the last detail with every spell they cast. It seems it's almost a point of honour for Scholars to pronounce their arcane chants in any way they choose. After all, they're just repeating, not casting. You can bet they're really careful how they sing it when they're trying it out for real in their cells or outside the House, sure! But then they get bored with it and want to get it down on paper as soon as possible, so they can get back to their scrolls and librams, ready to invent their next masterpiece."

"Still, rather you than me, Argand," Grimm replied. "When you start to actually expend power, it can really tire you out. On most days, I just want to crawl back to my cell and sleep. But how did you get into this Scribe business? If you don't mind me saying, you haven't exactly got the best ear and voice around here, and, from what you're saying, you need good pitch reading to do what you do."

"It's different for Scribes, Grimm," Argand said. "You need a quick ear, sure, but not a perfect one. Dothan says I have something called 'relative pitch'; as long as the Reader first hums me the note he uses to start the chant, I can work out the intervals quite well.

"I can't discriminate small intervals as well as you can; but, once you know the start note and the structure of the chant, the cadence becomes quite clear. Music is still a complete mystery to me as an

enjoyment, but I do understand it as applied to magic. I can tell jumps of a semitone, and intervals of less than that are signalled by accents and so on. You do need a good ear and voice to Read, but not so much to Scribe."

"Enough shop talk, anyway," Madar said. "Who's for a game of Three-handed Slap?"

"We aren't meant to gamble, Madar. You know that," Grimm admonished his friend.

"There you go again, always quoting the damn rules. We won't be gambling for money, idiot. Loser agrees to clean the other two players' shoes for a week."

"That's an obligation," Grimm observed. "We can't do that, either; that's Rule 5.2.2."

"All right, then. Loser has the option to renege without prejudice. Then it's not obligation, it's your choice."

Grimm sighed. "Well, all right then, Madar, as long as that's all there is. I like being a Neophyte, and I'm not going to do anything to jeopardise that."

"It's all right by me," Argand said, as Madar brought out a pack of cards from his robe.

"Right, so it's odd pictures wild every fourth hand, two points per trick over the line, red sixes change the order, aces low and prime numbers null unless matched," Madar said, shuffling the cards with bewildering dexterity.

"Just a moment, Madar," Grimm protested. "I've never played this game before."

"Really?" Madar's smile suggested a hungry wolf that had just spotted easy prey. "It's no worse than old Kargan's runes. Well, we'll soon teach you, won't we Argand? It's ever such an easy game really. I learnt to play it at Lower School. Let me just go through the rules once more..."

Grimm knew he hadn't a chance, and he knew the state his two friends got their shoes into. Madar and Argand liked to play in the muddiest corners of the yard. However, perhaps, a little judicious application of Mage Sight could make the difference.

"Another thing," Madar said with a sweet smile. "We check each other's aura on every hand. Just to make sure it's all fair and above board, of course. And it's good magic practice, too."

Grimm sighed. It looked like he might be in for a lot of shoe-cleaning.

Chapter 22 Darkness Falls

"Gently now, Afelnor," whispered Crohn, "let the power trickle out of you. The spell-casting was perfect; now you just need to control its application."

Grimm felt veins standing out on his forehead from the effort. He clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut, as he fought to hold in the torrent of power that threatened to burst from him. Even with his eyes closed, the Sight showed him all that he needed to do.

Gently, gently...

With a blue flash, the carefully-constructed building flew apart, as the Neophyte lost control of his tempestuous inner energies. "I am sorry, Lord Mage," he gasped. "I could not hold it in any longer." Pasteboard cards fluttered around the room like so many butterflies: some slightly scorched; some bent; and others torn.

"You managed four levels, Afelnor," Crohn said. "That is excellent. Tomorrow, we will attempt to complete the entire card house."

We, thought Grimm. Does Crohn intend to share the load with me? I don't think so!

"Very well, Afelnor," Crohn said, after careful appraisal of his pupil. "I think you have done all you can for today. Your reading tonight: Frubel and Squorn, chapter thirteen, section four. 'Spells of Levity in the first form; extended application with regard to multiple objects'. Read carefully what is said about the partition of power. Go and have something to eat, and we will talk again tomorrow. Well done."

Grimm bowed, and trudged off to the Refectory, alone and exhausted, as he often was these days. Once he had learned to pattern his mind to a spell and to link his power to the spell, he had thought he was well on the way to mastery, but that demon lurking within him was so hard to control.

No wonder, he thought, that it takes so long for a Neophyte to become a mage. I've spent four months toiling over a single spell, and I still can't control it properly. Nevertheless, now that he was performing real magic at last, he felt elated. He was doing something the majority of people would never understand. He felt a keen pang of joy at the moment that he harnessed his power, and released it into a perfectly-cast spell.

"Do sit down, Crohn," Thorn said, with easy bonhomie. "How go your Neophytes these days?"

"The boy, Hunar, shows a rare talent for projection," replied the Senior Magemaster. "He should make an excellent Reader. Koni has some problems with patterning, but he appears to have some ability with Healing. Empathy, you know."

"And Afelnor?"

Crohn sat in thought for a minute. "He has made remarkable progress in Reading, and he is working so hard to control his power." He is quite good at Healing and Scrying, too. It seems such a waste to use him on the Minor Magics; whilst he can form the patterns and he chants well, he has so much untapped power, and it roils around inside him."

Crohn rubbed his chin and meditated for a few moments before saying more.

"He added a new cadence to the Closure chant without my coaching," he blurted, "which makes the spell equivalent to the major Walling spell in the Discontinuous Surface class. I do not know how he managed to do this; it took me five years to learn that spell. I have been careful not to let him try it out yet, but the principle appears unassailable; Scholar Geban is looking at it in his spare time, and he seems quite impressed.

"Last week, I was called away unexpectedly. On my return, he was controlling his feather without words; Afelnor said he could form the pattern without the need for any chant. I chided him for practising in my absence, but I feel that the Minor Magics cannot suffice for long. I have no idea as to his limits. The level of energy within him is, quite frankly, frightening."

"A Questor, do you think? Is it possible?" asked Thorn, leaning forward in sudden, eager interest.

"Perhaps... perhaps. It has been a long time. If only I could be sure."

"He has self-control?"

"Like iron, Lord Thorn. But the Ordeal is no minor matter, as you know well, and the risks are great."

"Nobody knows that better than I do, Crohn. But we need new Questor blood. Only Xylox and Dalquist Rufior are available for Guild Quests, and the need is great. High Lodge expects more of us, and it is my duty to explore all possible avenues." He sat for a while in contemplation.

"Has he friends?" the Prelate asked.

"Two close friends: one a Neophyte Scribe, the other showing signs of a strong calling to Illusionism. Afelnor is on good terms with

most of the other boys, and he shows no signs of loneliness. He also gains great solace from spending time in the Library."

"That will make it easier," Thorn said, nodding. "You will arrange for Afelnor's Ordeal from this day. It means extra work for you, of course. Are you up to the task?"

Crohn spoke with a touch of pride. "I may be old, Guildmaster, but I am still strong. I have never trained a Questor before, but if you are certain that it is necessary for the good of the House, I will try."

His face darkened. "But I feel for the boy."

"A Questor, Crohn!" Thorn pounded his fist on the desk. "A Questor; a true weapon of the Guild! Personal feelings must not interfere with this; you must start his Ordeal at once."

"Lord Thorn," Crohn said, a concerned expression on his face, "Remember what happened to Urel and Garan. This boy could be ten times as destructive. His power is phenomenal."

Thorn leant forward, steeping his hands under his chin. "Magemaster Crohn, I order you to look for any incipient insanity in the boy. Watch him like a hawk. Nonetheless, I-we-need another Questor. The prestige of the House is at stake. I deplore cruelty as much as any man, but our need is too great to ignore."

Crohn struggled with his emotions. He was a mage of the old school, loyal to his House and his Prelate unto death, and refusal of a direct order from his superior mage was unthinkable; the House came first.

"Do you suggest any levers for me to use, Lord Prelate?" Crohn sighed in a resigned tone, hating himself for what he would be required to do.

"You should be able to do something with his grandfather's name. Forbid him access to the Library. Work him to the bone. Spread enmity. You remember how Arrol trained Rufior? He has turned out to be an excellent Questor. Break down the boy's defences. He will thank you for it when he is Acclaimed."

"Remember; if you help a chick from its egg, it will never attain its full strength. Always bear that in mind. You will need to be cruel, but the pain you feel will be worth bearing, and Afelnor will benefit also. Start today. You may go."

Thorn began to leaf through his papers: the audience was at an end. Crohn left the office with a heavy step; this would not be easy.

"Afelnor, it has come to my attention that you have been spending too much time in the Library: time which you might more profitably spend in the pursuit of your studies. This privilege is suspended. As a Neophyte, you should be above such trivialities."

Grimm felt puzzled and aghast. "What is the reason for this, Lord Mage?"

"Do not dare to question my instructions, Neophyte! You do not need to know the reason, Afelnor. Just do as you are told.

"It has also been noticed that you are spending some time with another Neophyte, Forutia, at a crucial time in his training and yours. You are also consorting with Neophyte Gaheela, who is a distracting influence upon you. I understand that you have even been seen gambling with cards! This is forbidden, as you well know.

"I have chosen to assume that this was a passing phase until now, but I will henceforth apply the full rigour of the Rules. You will not consort with these boys again. Do you understand? I might point out that, in the absence of Uric, the scullery boy, Master Chef Margus needs some more help. Do I make myself abundantly clear? Either you will cease to associate with these boys or I may decide that your vocation does not lie in this Art."

Grimm shrank from the Magemaster: Crohn's ire was terrific.

"Now, I regret, it seems that we must return once more to the Levity spell. You have not mastered some aspects of this simple spell to my satisfaction. Doubtless, the distractions of which I have spoken have dulled your mind. The only other explanation is that you regard such basic matters as beneath you. Deeper and longer study is necessary if you are to make progress as a Neophyte Reader. Attention to details is the mark of a true Reader."

Grimm's heart sank. Did Crohn see his future as a Reader only? So much for his dreams of higher callings! Allied to this, he had felt sure that his command of the spell of Levity in all its forms was faultless, and this brought bitter disappointment.

He fought to cover his deep chagrin. "Thank you, Lord Mage, for your guidance," he said, eyes downcast. "I will try my very hardest, and I apologise deeply for my slackness."

"So, you admit to laziness," sneered Crohn. "That must stop, and stop now! Evidently, any zeal that you may have had needs to be renewed. So, let us begin once more; perhaps it would be best to revert to Basic Runes. Let us see what else you have neglected. Recite!"

"The First Family: Adzh, Karkh, Tekh, Rukh... " Grimm chanted, as he had as a first-year Student. After hour upon hour of faithful chanting, he began to make occasional mistakes, whereupon Crohn would berate him heatedly.

Thus began a life of leaden monotony for Grimm. Worse, and to his mystification, many of the boys in the Scholasticate began to taunt him as "Traitor's spawn", or worse. Some would spit at him as he passed. Some attempted physical violence upon him, and it seemed that a Magemaster only ever intervened if Grimm began to gain the upper hand, where once they had appeared at the first sign of bullying. It was always Grimm who was punished, and never his assailants.

Sly trips, slaps, pushes and so forth became routine, and his former nemesis, Shumal, and his ever-present toady, Ruvin, reverted to their former depredations, never tiring of finding new torments for Grimm, now that he no longer had the protection of Madar or Argand, and now that the Magemasters seemed no longer to care. They took care not to pick on other boys, but Magemaster Faffel had idly mentioned in their presence that the peasant boy Afelnor seemed to have been getting rather above himself, and that he might be all the better for a little lesson in humility. This last was punctuated with a meaningful look at Shumal, who had grinned in understanding. Who was he to refuse a Magemaster's request?

With the Library denied him, Grimm sought out Dalquist on one of his rare visits to the Scholasticate. Dalquist was now a confident, imposing figure of a man, wearing a finely trimmed black beard and blue silk robes. His face was bronzed and his movement confident. Evidently, the life of a Questor agreed with him.

"Questor Dalquist," he said, "I am Neophyte Afelnor. You introduced me to the Library on my second day here."

Dalquist looked a little lost for a moment, and then he slapped his brow as his face cleared.

"Of course!" he cried. "Your name's... Grimm; I remember you now! Why, you're as tall as I am now! I'm so pleased to see that you are still here. How are your studies going?"

"I'm a Neophyte studying to be a Mage Reader, Lord Mage," said

Grimm, trying to keep his voice cheerful.

"I do seem to remember telling you that my name is Dalquist. I'm almost sure of it."

The Questor accompanied this with a conspiratorial wink, giving Grimm a flash of the old Dalquist he remembered so well from his childhood.

"I'm sorry, Dalquist," he said with a smile. "I need to ask you some questions, if you don't mind. I have been forbidden the Library and the company of my friends. Now, everybody else has turned against me. Could I have done something wrong without knowing it, something for which I'm being punished?"

Dalquist spoke slowly: "Have you done well in... in your Reading studies, Grimm?"

The Neophyte shrugged. "Magemaster Crohn used to be quite complimentary to me," he said with a sigh. "The only time he looked unhappy was when I levitated my feather without using the usual chant. He also looked disturbed when I suggested an improvement to one of the Minor Magics to make it more powerful. He wasn't too happy but, in the end, he let me try the spell, and it worked; he then congratulated me on finding a new variation. Now, he finds fault in everything I say or do."

Dalquist gave a neutral, noncommittal grunt. "And all these strictures and problems; did they all start at the same time?" Grimm scanned the Questor's face for any sign of comprehension in his older friend, but he saw none. He knew now, of course, that it was considered a serious breach of Guild protocol to use Mage Sight on a Guild Brother without express permission, so he refrained from invoking the skill.

"Yes, Dalquist," he said. "It started almost immediately after Magemaster Crohn was called to visit Prelate Thorn one day. That's why I'm worried that this is some sort of punishment. I once asked Magemaster Crohn if there was any reason for his sudden displeasure, but he punished me for insolence without a word of explanation."

Dalquist's brow furrowed and Grimm could tell that his friend was struggling to find the right words. "Grimm, I... I do think I comprehend your Magemaster's... ill humour towards you. I will tell you that I do not believe that you have committed any grave offence. However, I can and must say no more.

"Since these... penances are evidently your tutor's will, it would seem best if I we do not converse again for some time. I cannot tell you the reasons for this, but suffice it to say that you will understand in time. Work hard and do as you are bidden. Goodbye, Grimm Afelnor, and be of good heart."

Dalquist turned on his heel and rushed off. "Dalquist, wait!" cried

Grimm in anguish, but the mage was already out of sight. He had counted on his oldest friend in the Scholasticate but, now, even Dalquist had deserted him. He had not failed to notice that the Questor had even switched into the starchy, formal Mage Speech, as if to exclude him from any kind of intimacy.

Fighting black despair, Grimm heard a mutter of "Traitor's bastard!" as a missile struck him on the shoulder from behind. He whirled to see a group of sneering younger boys, their faces contorted in hateful sneers. He advanced towards them with menace in his eyes, but they ran away.

"Just leave me alone, or you'll regret it!" Grimm yelled to an empty corridor. He felt a great weight on his shoulders as he trudged disconsolately to his monotonous afternoon session with Crohn.

Fighting to keep his voice clear and level, Grimm ran through the spell of Mage Light for the hundredth time that afternoon but, this time, he found it hard to concentrate. The light flickered, but it died rather than bursting into the luminous globe he had produced in his earlier efforts. Once, Crohn would have expressed solicitous concern for Grimm's health, but, this time, the Magemaster slapped him around the face, hard, and he raged at the Neophyte. Grimm was too stunned to speak. Crohn had never raised a hand to him before.

"Is there any point in teaching you anything, you useless ingrate?" the Magemaster screamed. "Did I spend decades mastering a noble art in order to waste my efforts on an untalented, indolent pauper? You can't get the simplest spell right! Doubtless you find these minor incantations beneath the dignity of such a high and mighty magic-user?"

Grimm began to stammer an apology, astonished at the heat of Crohn's ire, but the tirade continued heedlessly for another ten minutes, brutal and unremitting.

"Get out!" Crohn spat at last, "and do not bother to come back until you have some control over yourself! Look at you now, like a dying duck in a thunderstorm! Pull yourself together and apply yourself, or you will find yourself back in the gutter from which you came! Get out of my sight, you pathetic excuse for a Neophyte, and do not even think of returning until you have improved your attitude!"

A few short weeks before, Crohn had encouraged Grimm's least success. Now, the Magemaster jumped on his slightest error with furious zeal. Time and again, Crohn forced the Neophyte to carry out a simple chant, over and over again, until fatigue or hoarseness prompted a mistake, and then he exploded in a towering rage, which often involved physical violence from his hand, his Mage Staff, or from any other convenient nearby object.

The training sessions now became longer and longer, usually ending only after Grimm had finally made a mistake. It seemed to Grimm that Crohn was deliberately trying to force him into error, so he could load yet further toil onto his pupil's shoulders. Grimm now had almost no spare time, due to all the punishments and extra studies Crohn had imposed on him, and he began to dread the start of each new day.

Shumal and his ilk seemed to revel in finding new ways to humiliate and hurt him, and he slunk through the corridors, trying to cling to the shadows.

Months of pain and anguish passed with dreadful lethargy. Now, Grimm could feel his misery pouring out of him like a thick, black, oily smoke that oozed from his every pore and rolled across the floor in all directions. Could nobody else see this? Why couldn't they leave him alone?

Grimm desired nothing more than to be left in peace in his black cloud, but the animosity and abuse continued unabated and, if anything, increased. The young Neophyte often cried himself quietly to sleep at night and then had dreams in which he was possessed by intense, hysterical, racking jags of tears for no apparent reason. His other dreams were strange and unnerving, involving violence against gangs of faceless mannequins, or where he found himself naked in front of a cackling multitude of mocking children.

Chapter 23: The Edge of Insanity

Grimm turned fourteen but, instead of the occasion being a day of celebration, it merely blurred into the featureless mass of roiling black smoke, his one constant companion. The daily torrent of depredation continued apace.

Always slender, he had now become emaciated and gaunt, and he flitted like a shadow through the corridors, trying not to be noticed. He often skipped meals, so as to avoid the cruel taunts of the others. In itself, this was an infraction of the Rules, and it often earned him severe punishment from Magemaster Crohn for his transgression. Nonetheless, tempting as it was to surrender to the darkness, Grimm soldiered on for the sake of his sullied family name. Eventually, even that solace was lost to him; he no longer knew what he was doing, or why. He simply was.

The end of a typical day for Grimm:

"Why do I bother with you, idiot? I should be retired by now, living in the comfort that decades of service to my House have justly earned. Instead, I am given the tutelage of a lazy brat who throws my solicitude back into my face!"

"I... I tried, Lord Mage..."

"Look at you now, blubbing like a baby at my great kindness in trying to correct your bumbling errors! My patience is not inexhaustible, Afelnor. If you do not apply yourself more than you have, the scullery awaits you.

"I advise you to think clearly as to where your true vocation lies. Oh, go on, go back to your cell and wallow in self-pity, you useless object. Go away! I have had enough of you for one day."

So it went on.

Crohn sat in the presence of Lord Thorn, disconsolate and tired. Despite his proud boast to the Prelate all those months before, he knew he was getting too old for his role as the enforcer of Grimm's cruel Ordeal.

"How is the boy, Afelnor, coping with his Ordeal?" Thorn asked without the slightest trace of compassion on his face.

"It has been nearly six months now, Lord Prelate. It cannot last for much longer. I have no idea what it is that keeps the boy going."

"Well, let us hope for all our sakes that Afelnor breaks soon," the Prelate said, as if expressing a hope that a period of rainy weather might end soon.

"Not the least for my sake, Guildmaster. I lack the taste for this scientific sadism, applied to a blameless and intelligent youth. Another month of this, and I shall have to stop before I lose my own mind. I cannot bear to visit this treatment on the boy for much longer, whatever the justification for his treatment."

Crohn wiped his brow, his hand trembling. "I cannot find it in my heart to approve of this treatment, whatever the justification. He works so hard, and so well, to gain my least compliment but, instead of praise, I continue to push him until he makes the tiniest mistake, at which point I excoriate him without mercy. This, I must remind you, has been your counsel, Lord Prelate."

"None of us likes this," Thorn said, waving a hand as if shooing away an irritating fly. "Remember that I went through much the same experience many years ago, but it made a Questor of me. Most Readers take decades to reach their full potential, and old men are in no condition to undertake arduous Quests for the House. A Questor is a rare bird, and he can mature in a matter of years. That makes him valuable to the House and the Guild."

"I do not believe Afelnor can take another month of this, Lord Prelate. I seem to remember that your own Ordeal was finished in three months, and that even you were close to madness by the end. That Afelnor yet endures is a testament to phenomenal self-control, and yet I see the spectre of insanity hanging over him like some carrion bird.

"It hurts me so much that I have taught him to enhance his control and am now stripping that away with every arbitrary decree I make. One moment, I berate him for doing something, the next for omitting it, so that even I lose track of what my current orders are.

"We may be making a monster or a gibbering fool of this good-natured, intelligent and talented boy, and that is our shame. We have taken away his friends and made all others his enemies. Should this all prove in vain, I could not in conscience say I felt the risk was worthwhile. Also, should he break out whilst deranged, and prove capable of harnessing his entire stock of power, the danger to us all could be considerable. I have never seen so much energy in one so young. Not even in you, Lord Prelate."

Crohn crossed his arms in an attitude as defiant as protocol allowed. Long moments of silence passed, and even Thorn's steely, Questor's gaze lacked the power to make the Senior Magemaster look away.

"Very well, Crohn. One more week, and then we will move on."

"You will call a halt to the Ordeal, Guildmaster?" Crohn asked, his heart filling with hope.

"No," Thorn replied, a half-smile etched on his face, "but I shall appoint another as his mentor: perhaps Faffel. I cannot afford to lose a good Mage Manipulant and another Senior Magemaster."

Crohn felt blood rushing into his face as he regarded the casual, callous expression on Thorn's face. His grip tightened on his Mage Staff, and he yearned to smash its head between the Prelate's eyes. Nonetheless, Crohn was a Guild man first and foremost; it was not for him to dictate or judge House policy.

"Very well, Lord Prelate," he said. "But the responsibility for whatever happens to this decent, intelligent, diligent boy will be yours. And mine, may the Names forgive me."

Crohn wanted to scream at Thorn, to damn him to the deepest pit of oblivion, but his respect for the House held him back. The Prelate was the embodiment of the House he loved: Thorn was the House! He felt so confused in his roiling, warring emotions that he left Thorn's office without bowing.

Grimm sat miserably in the recreation yard imagining the black smoke boiling off him, rolling in a turbid, heavy mass over the ground. One minute blended indistinguishably into another and he muttered short, odd phrases to himself as his head lolled and nodded on his shoulders. A dull, leaden ache filled his body, and undirected energies and emotions made him feel as if he was about to burst. A part of him wanted to be somewhere else-anywhere else-but he could not find the motivation to persuade his legs or arms to move.

Two figures began to move towards him, and he hunched deeper into his robes, hoping they would pass him by. The larger of the two boys was Shumal Tolarin, now a burly, muscular youth, and Grimm regarded his nemesis with a weary resignation. It was a wonder that Shumal had lasted in the Scholasticate as long as he had, thought Grimm.

The other boy was his ever-present and waspish hanger-on, Ruvin, who always took the lead from his larger friend.

"Well, if it isn't the pauper traitor's bastard," Shumal said with satisfaction and malice. "You see, Ruvin, he thinks he's too good to play ball with the rest of us."

He seemed to be waiting for some response from Grimm, but

none came. Grimm continued to sit with his head bowed.

"I'm talking to you, guttersnipe!" Shumal snapped.

Grimm dragged himself into the real world and raised his head a little to look into the larger boy's burning, hate-filled eyes.

"Shumal, can't you just leave me alone?" he mumbled. Even moving his lips and tongue seemed difficult, and it felt as if his lungs and chest were as unyielding and heavy as granite or lead. "You don't want me to play with you, anyway."

"Man alive, that's true enough!" Shumal cried, and Ruvin gave a high-pitched cackle in response. "The great mage himself! Go on, pauper; turn Crohn into a frog. Or even better, make yourself disappear."

Shumal flicked Grimm on the nose with a finger, and the pain seemed out of all proportion to the assault, blooming into a tiny, hot, screaming agony.

A figure appeared at Grimm's side: it looked like Madar. "Tolarin, why don't you just pick on somebody of your own quality? I think I saw the like floating down the sewer last night."

Grimm forced his mouth to move. "Madar, don't, please. You'll only make things worse." A part of him dimly recognised that he had broken another of Crohn's innumerable rules just by talking to his friend. However, one punishment seemed much like another these days.

Shumal was not one to let an insult go unanswered. He half turned his back on Madar and then lashed out with a leather-booted foot to catapult Grimm's friend into the wall with a loud thump. Madar was no coward, and he flew at Shumal, his fists flailing.

Grimm staggered to his feet, trying to interpose himself between the two. He was rewarded with a solid punch on the ear from Shumal that made his head spin. A trip from Ruvin made him fall heavily to the ground, knocking the wind from him. More pain, although it hardly seemed important now.

"Relax, peasant, I'll get round to you soon enough," Shumal sneered, seemingly impervious to Madar's blows, "right after I've dealt with your hot-headed friend, Gaheela."

Madar felled Ruvin with a good blow to the smaller bully's stomach. As he spun to face Shumal, he received a blow on the point of his jaw that snapped his head back with a loud clicking sound. His eyes turned skyward; he collapsed to the ground and lay still. As he lay there, unconscious, Shumal kicked him in the ribs with brutal force.

Grimm's jaw worked but no sound came out, as rage and hatred surged within him. His eyes bulged, and he felt his face suffusing with blood.

Shumal turned to him with another confident sneer, but this faded, and his face grew pale. Grimm laughed; a high-pitched sound with hysteria rising within it. He was invincible, and he would not be denied!

He walked towards the two bullies with both arms outstretched, laughing again with even greater intensity as they stumbled backwards.

I am strength. I am power. These two objects are nothing, nothing!

As his two enemies backed away from him with nervous entreaties, he cried "Boo!"

So much pain. So much hurt. When they die, it will all end. They will die; Shumal, Ruvin, Crohn... all of them.

As if from far away, Grimm heard a scream, a long, keening note which grew higher and higher in pitch and went on for an impossibly long time.

"He's gone crazy!" Ruvin cried, as Grimm's long scream grew louder and louder. The other boys in the yard all stopped to turn and stare at Grimm; he did not care. He vaguely registered the dark figure of Crohn, hurtling across the yard at a speed belying his age, but the old man was too slow.

He cannot deny me my righteous wrath, he thought, as he felt the power building within him and the shriek rose even higher in pitch and volume.

When it seemed that the cry could get no louder, a huge bellow arose from the depths of Grimm's throat, a strange incantation he had never been taught by Crohn: "Ah'hachana sk'redye shareet!"

Ruvin flew backwards through the air, propelled by an invisible hand, to fall to the ground twenty feet away with a heavy thump. He lay still, and Grimm felt a pang of deep pleasure.

"Chak'ya mandeta shl'yev'na chut!" Another nonsense chant: this time, Shumal reeled as if punched by a giant, unseen fist. The bully staggered, but he stayed on his feet. Grimm frowned at this resistance, and he heard more strange syllables burst from his lips: "Tok yourut sh'tak'ye dar!" Shumal fell to his knees at Grimm's feet, sobbing and clutching his temples in agony, as if his head were clasped in some mighty iron clamp.

Grimm laughed again, tears running freely from his eyes.

This is so easy! These worms are worthless dross; nobody can oppose me!

He looked down at the fallen bully, fascinated by the new power he had found.

"Goodbye, Shumal," he muttered. "Rot in Hell."

He gathered his powers for one last spell, but he felt strong arms

about him, confining him.

An urgent, familiar voice sounded in his left ear: "I did this to you, Grimm! I, Crohn, the Senior Magemaster, did this! If you have hate, hate me, not these boys! I made them do it. Let it out, let it all out!"

Grimm's head was spinning, and he felt hot tears of rage and frustration burn in his eyes.

"Let me go!" he screamed, struggling against the imprisoning arms. "I will destroy them! It is my right!"

His head spun as he looked around him: Shumal was lying at his feet, screaming; Ruvin lay sprawled and motionless on the far side of the yard; the other boys stared at him, pale, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. With a cold shock, he saw the same terrified expression on Madar, who was scrambling to his feet and backing away, his face a mask of sheer terror.

Torn by conflicting emotions, he sagged in Crohn's arms.

"What am I? I'm a freak, a sport, a mutant!" he screamed, terrified by what he had become. Then the cold, dark demons descended again. "Let me go! I am power! You must all die!"

He struggled to free himself from Crohn's grip, but to no avail.

You can't hold me, old man, he thought. You may join these faithless worms in their fate.

He cackled, madness playing with his mind, and he began to chant again in this strange, marvellous new language, but Crohn grunted and held on, enraging Grimm with his resistance.

Madar stared in horror at the bizarre spectacle; his gentle, intelligent friend had been replaced by an insane, slaving, avenging demon.

"There will be no more class today!" Crohn bellowed in a hoarse croak, "You will stay out here until called. Play on! Play hard! But stay out here!"

Crohn began to haul Grimm towards the Scholasticate, and it did not escape Madar's notice that, even though he held Grimm's arms firmly pinioned, the Magemaster flinched as if punched; every step of the way.

Blue light coruscated and flickered around demon-Grimm's head, and he wailed and screamed as he was dragged away.

"What did that bastard, Crohn, do to him?" Madar wondered, as he eyed the spitting, mad-eyed creature struggling in the Magemaster's arms. He remembered what had happened to the gentle, artistic Ereka, and he realised that the same wild insanity had now sunk its claws into his friend.

For a seeming age, Grimm flicked between alternate states of terrified sanity and fervent, furious death-wish. He had no idea how long he fought the vicious demons that possessed him but, at last, sanity won.

Sanity was pain and exhaustion. Grimm was no longer the earthly avatar of Nemesis, invincible and vengeful; now, he was a heap of bruised, exhausted mortality. As consciousness came to Grimm Afelnor, he realised he was in the shattered remains of his former classroom, a tightly-hunched figure crouched in the corner of a scene of devastation.

One table was embedded feet-first in the ceiling; other tables and chairs lay, shattered to fragments, around the room. Plaster and broken glass lay on the floor, and the large oak door hung on a single hinge. Grimm noted the blackened signatures of quickly-snuffed fires in several areas of the classroom.

He felt a warm, heavy stream running from his nose, and he raised a hand to his nostrils, wiping a thick string of drool from his mouth as he did so. His hand bore a tracery of dark-red blood as he raised it to the level of his eyes, and he wondered how he had come to this pass.

I did this-somehow, he thought, regarding the destruction with a dispassionate eye.

With an awkward lurch, he managed to sit up. Again, he wiped the back of his hand across his nose and mouth, and he saw Crohn sitting quietly in one of the few intact chairs, looking older than Grimm had ever seen him. Contusions and bruises covered his face, his eyes were bloodshot, and his large nose was splayed across the left side of his face.

"It is over." The words came from Crohn as a rasping, nasal croak.

"I am to be dismissed?" Grimm asked, a horror of what he had done rising like cold, acrid bile within him.

"No, Afelnor, your torment is over, not your vocation. No more loneliness, no more hatred. What has happened to you was planned, and you have my heartfelt regret at the way you were treated. I am sorry beyond what words can express."

Was this Crohn? The man spoke more as a concerned father than a tyrannical tutor.

"What were those words I screamed, Lord Mage?" Grimm cried, the words torn from his ravaged throat. "They were no chants I had learned from you, or any other Magemaster."

"No other mage knows those words," Crohn muttered, his head

lolling on his chest. "That was your own, personal spell-language. A Mage Questor makes his own magic in his own manner."

"I am to be... a Questor?" Grimm's astonishment banished his exhaustion for a moment.

"You already are a Questor in all but name, young Afelnor," Crohn said, a dreamy half-smile hovering on his bloodied lips. "What happened to you is over, and I feel ashamed that I ever agreed to it. But it is over, I promise you. You have prevailed heroically and fulfilled my highest expectations. You are no longer a Neophyte, but an Adept Questor: a mage-in-waiting."

Crohn's words began to filter through Grimm's mind, and the youth realised that the Magemaster had chosen to visit this nightmare on his pupil.

"I nearly lost my mind!" he cried. "As I went mad, you stood by and watched!"

"Adept Grimm, I cannot know what agonies you endured," Crohn said, his face twisted by emotions at which Grimm could only guess, "but I felt all of your pain with you, and I ached to free you. You have freed yourself, and only in this way can a new Questor be born. The Outbreak marks your re-birth."

Grimm tried to stand, but his legs refused to obey him; indeed, to his shame, it seemed he had no more strength than a new-born babe. Crohn walked over to the tall, slender boy and gathered him up in strong arms, as if Grimm weighed no more than a feather. The Magemaster pushed the battered door open and took Grimm from the room.

"Where are we going?" Grimm asked, lolling in the old man's arms.

"We go to the Infirmary, Adept Grimm. You have gone through much and need rest and comfort. As do I; I could not withstand another beating such as I received today.

"Rest in the knowledge that you have done well, that you are appreciated and loved, and that your suffering is over; over!" As they entered the quiet, white, spotless Infirmary, Healer Chet, who had once schooled Grimm in Herbal Lore, rushed up to take the burden from Crohn. "I will see you in a short while, Adept Grimm," the Magemaser muttered, looking every inch the nonagenarian he was. "Let the Healer tend to you first."

Grimm was exhausted, and, uncomplaining, he let Chet wash him and tend to his cuts, bruises and aches. With careful, soothing hands, the Healer dressed him in a comfortable linen night-shirt and carried him to a cool, smoothly-dressed bed in a cell separate from the main infirmary, covering him with a clean sheet and a warm blanket. The down pillow, so different from the straw to which Grimm had become

used, felt soft under his head, and he was about to drift off to sleep when he was aware, once more, of Crohn's presence at his side.

"Rest now, young Afelnor," the Magemaster said; his tone of voice so far removed from that of the Crohn Grimm had come to know that he stared in astonishment. "This morning you were just a Neophyte. Tonight you are an Adept; a Mage Questor in training. The day's travails are behind you, but the struggle begins anew when you are well again. You will be expected to work; work as you never have before."

Grimm nodded with little real comprehension.

"You will, however, be treated with kindness, compassion and the respect due to you as a man and a true Adept," Crohn continued. "I am convinced, now, that you will reach your true potential. No Neophyte Questor who has ever survived the Ordeal with a whole mind has failed to be Acclaimed."

Grimm registered the Magemaster's words, but he had only one thing on his mind as fatigue clouded his mind. "Can I sleep, now, Lord Mage?" he pleaded. "Can I sleep once more without those terrible dreams?" He wanted to sleep, but he knew too well the terrors that his dreams might hold.

"Yes, my son, sleep well," Crohn said, laying a gentle, soothing hand on Grimm's brow. "Please, call me Lord Mage no more. Within this House, you will now only address the Prelate by this title. I am plain Magemaster Crohn now."

A sudden thought alarmed Grimm. "Lord... Magemaster Crohn, what if I should wreak more destruction in my sleep?"

"The destruction was born of rage and frustration, and the Healer has cast a spell of Quietude upon you to assuage this," Crohn replied. "In any case, I doubt you have within you a pennyweight of power that you have not used today."

Grimm laughed; it sounded like a dog's bark, and he knew Crohn was right.

"It will be some time until you have recovered your full strength," the Magemaster continued, "and I will have taught you much by that time. Sleep well."

Grimm's head spun, as if a spell had been cast upon him, and he did as he was bidden. Crohn walked from the room like a drunkard and collapsed in the arms of the waiting Healer; he, too, could rest now.

Chapter 24: Aftermath

Grimm had been in the infirmary for two days when two visitors came to see him: Madar and Argand; the former sporting a gloriously-hued ring around his left eye and a swollen lip. Grimm's face lit up; he had not been allowed to associate freely for a long time.

"How are you now, Grimm?" Madar asked, his voice cautious.

"I do ache," Grimm admitted, "and I'm tired a lot of the time; but I'm better off than you, by the looks of things, Madar! It is so good to see you both."

Madar nodded, but his expression was still grave.

"Believe me, Grimm," he said, "I'm better off than that bloated oaf, Shumal, and his slimy hanger-on, Ruvin, have been since you finished with them."

Grimm felt a moment of panic, but Madar assuaged his worries with an airy wave of his hand.

"Don't worry," Madar said, "they're not exactly at death's door, but they're in no condition to celebrate, I can assure you."

Argand spoke next; even his beefy face looked pale and worried. "Magemaster Crohn told us all about your Ordeal, Grimm," he said. "It was a filthy thing but I'm glad you're over it. He says you're to be a Questor, the first for ten years. Who would have thought it, Mage Questor! Can you tell us anything about it now?"

Grimm nodded. "I think I'm free now of the Compulsion that was placed on me," he said. "It seems I burnt it out in what Crohn calls my 'Outbreak'. You are both Neophytes now, so you probably know a few spells, although I'd sooner not say much about that at the moment-it's got some bad associations. But do you remember how we were taught that Questors make their own magic?"

Madar and Argand nodded.

"It seems I have my own, personal, mage-language that nobody else shares, so I don't need scrolls or rote-learning of spells. I can still Read as well as any conventional mage, but, apparently, if I can visualise a spell, I can cast it. I have no idea yet of how it works."

"Apart from the fact that it's obviously not a good idea to cross you when you're in a bad mood!" Argand was freely smiling now. "Evidently I taught you well in that regard!"

Grimm shrugged. "I did it, but I really don't know how; I can scarcely believe it myself. I cast those spells when I was burning with anger. Now, I have to go back to school to learn how to call it up when I'm calm. Let me tell you, it really took it out of me."

"Will you be free to associate with us again when you're in training?" asked Madar.

Grimm nodded. "Oh, yes, and I'll be allowed free run of the Library again; and not just the public books and scrolls. I am being told that I may not have much free time to enjoy my new liberty, though."

"Well, just remember that we're still here," Argand said, "and we owe you a lot."

Grimm shook his head firmly. "You owe me nothing, Argand. I owe you everything. You have always been my friends, and hope you always will be. Without you two, I'd have gone under ages ago."

"We owe you more than you can guess, Grimm," Madar said, now wearing his habitual gamin's grin. "Crohn won't be taking us any more; he'll be in sole charge of you, although he's still Senior Magemaster. I overheard him telling Kargan that the chance to raise a Questor has been the pinnacle of his life's work, and he should be able to retire gracefully, with honour and the Guild's gratitude."

Grimm smiled; he had mixed feelings about Senior Magemaster Crohn, but he recognised that Crohn had done what he had thought was right.

"I do feel for you, though," Madar continued. "How can you bear to look at him after what he did to you?"

Grimm shrugged. "He's really not so bad when you get to know him, Madar. And he was under orders from high up to do what he did. He really didn't enjoy it."

"Ha! He surely hid that well," Madar said, with a contemptuous toss of his head. "Oh well, I'm afraid we have to be going; we were told by the Healer not to overtax you. Got to keep your strength up for all the visitors you'll be getting, begging your forgiveness."

"Oh, I doubt that!" Grimm cried. "They were keen enough to abuse me."

"You'd be surprised," Argand said, wagging his right index finger. "They're really not all so bad when you get to know them. And even some of the worst of them were probably under some Compulsion to do what they did, even if they didn't want to or understand why."

Grimm smiled wryly, as his defence of Crohn was tossed back to him as a defence of his other abusers.

"I think you'll find that many of them are truly ashamed of their behaviour. The rest, of course, are just terrified that you'll blast them into a thousand motes with your eldritch power. You'll soon know which is which, just check their auras. You might have fun scaring the rotten ones."

Healer Chet came in to shoo out the boys. As his friends left, Grimm thought of what Argand had said. Yes, it might be fun just to tease some of the others a little. But just a little.

A tall figure entered, and Grimm recognised Dalquist, resplendent in sumptuous robes of bottle-green velvet.

"Adept Questor Grimm, it is so, so good to see you."

Grimm brightened at Dalquist's use of his new title. He took his friend's right hand in a firm, brotherly grip and smiled.

"I saw what happened in the Scholasticate," Dalquist drawled, "and I pride myself that I can recognise the spoor of an angry Questor."

Grimm gulped and nodded. "I demolished it, didn't I, Dalquist?"

The Questor nodded. "Believe me, I completely understand and sympathise with what you've gone through," he said. "When I broke out, they needed to rebuild a large part of the Refectory. That was very unpopular with the other Students! It looks like you let Crohn off pretty lightly. At least he can walk, albeit with the aid of a stick! You look pretty good, considering what you've been through."

"I feel much better than I did yesterday, Dalquist," Grimm assured him. "I'm just looking forward to making Shumal Tolarin and his friends sweat a little; and maybe a little play-magic."

"Don't do it, Grimm," Dalquist urged. "It's not worthy of a Questor. Believe me: sweet forgiveness will have far more effect on them. Many of them were probably under some Compulsion, or under threat of expulsion to act as they did, and had no choice in the way they acted. You won't be able to tell, even by their auras, as they will all feel guilt, even if it wasn't their fault."

"Of course, they taunted you and hurt you. But now you're a Questor, and the finest treasure in the land can't buy that. You're a fighter and a survivor; remember that nobody can belittle that, or take it away from you."

Grimm nodded slowly, not quite seeing Dalquist's point.

"Just be proud of what you are," the Questor continued, "and of what you always were; take pity on these poor, rich simpletons. When you're fully trained, you may be able to destroy fortresses at a word of command, or to subdue demons and dragons. Rise above petty revenge as only one of true power and nobility can and you will gain respect and admiration. These Students and Neophytes will remember every slight, every trip and every punch they visited on you, and they'll relive every one ten-fold in shame. Will you promise me this?"

Grimm thought long and hard about Dalquist's words before he answered, "If you think it best, Dalquist, I shall bury my bitterness," he said with a sigh. "But it would have been fun to watch them squirm a bit."

Dalquist shook his head decisively. "You'd have people who cowered in fear at the mention of your name. Wouldn't it be better to have others who remember that you were man enough to forgive when you deserved revenge, and to admire you for it? Their own shame will be worse than the direst torments you could ever inflict on them."

Grimm nodded. "I see the right of what you say, Dalquist, but I don't feel it. They hurt me more than you can believe."

Dalquist's face fell. "I had nobody to give me the counsel that I just gave you, Grimm. It took me a while to learn just how bitter the taste of revenge can be. It cost me some good friends, although I didn't think of them as such at the time. In the end, I hurt only myself. And I had been hurt enough by then."

Grimm gripped Dalquist's hand tighter, and he laughed as well as a sore throat would allow.

"Very well, Brother Questor," he cried, "if I may presume to call you such. I'll be a saint for your sake. In any case, I suspect I'll need to learn a lot of patience and forbearance for what I'll have to go through in the near future."

"You will indeed, Grimm Afelnor," Dalquist said, wagging an admonitory finger, "better start learning now. In a few days, you'll be starting on the real grind. You'll need every ounce of patience and forbearance if you're to get through that!"

Crohn placed a fist-sized rock on the table before Grimm. The Adept dutifully chanted the Minor Magic spell of Levity in the First Class. As he had known it would, the rock wobbled a little, but it stayed on the table.

"Now, the spell was properly cast; you know that because you have had endless practice in it. Why did the rock fail to lift?" Crohn droned, his left eyebrow quizzically raised.

"The First Class of the spell of Levity is applicable to light objects, such as twigs, with little tendency to lift," Grimm chanted, with the effortless recall born of long study and repetition. "I know there is a special variation of the First Class of the spell for lifting heavy objects, but I do not know it. I suppose I could look it up in a grimoire."

"If you do think that, I will begin to believe that I have been training the wrong boy!" Crohn snapped. "You do not need one spell for this, one spell for that, and another for the third Wednesday in

June! You are a Questor, not a Reader. Most Questors can perform simple magic like this in their heads without even a chant or gesture. It is only a small rock."

"Well, I suggest you do it, then!" Grimm snarled. He had been encouraged by Crohn to be forthright as a Mage Questor should be, and he had been roused very early that morning.

"Of course I could do it," Crohn shot back, "but not the way you could. You need to regain command of your own spell-language."

"But I can't!" cried Grimm. "You can't even tell me how. All you can do is to tell me to do it, and I don't know how!"

"You are an Adept! Use Mage Speech, as you have been taught; how many times have you been told that?"

Grimm shrugged; he felt beyond caring.

"Move the damned rock, Afelnor," Crohn shouted, "and we can go to breakfast; I, for one, am quite hungry! Just lift the rock. It is nothing; a small rock you can hold easily in your hand. If you can destroy a classroom, this should be child's play!"

Grimm glared at the rock as if he could scare it into motion. It sat there, taunting him with its insolent inertia.

Move, move, damn it! he thought.

The rock sat steadfastly on the table as if mocking him. Under Crohn's critical gaze, he felt annoyance rising in him.

Move, you bastard lump of stone!

His power was ranged in orderly lines, ready to be patterned into a spell. If only he knew the right pattern! His mind twisted and turned like a man trying to use a poorly made key to unlock a door.

Grimm mulled the problem.

Try not to think of the words, just concentrate on the task in hand. Dissociate. The task is all.

He was about to give up when, just like a key slipping into a lock, something clicked.

"Skeykak!" It came unbidden from his lips as a blue flash filled the room. The rock thudded into the ceiling with the force of a cannonball and shattered, showering both Grimm and Crohn with rock shards and plaster.

"Ri-ight," Crohn said slowly. "I see that your old problem of power control has not left you. We will obviously need to work on that, but at least you understand the principle; that is good. Now we can eat. After breakfast we will review your thoughts and feelings concerning what you have just done."

Grimm sat, a little stunned, and made no comment as he stared, dumbstruck, at the new hole in the ceiling, from which a fine powder of pulverised plaster was gently falling.

"Do not worry about it, too much, Afelnor. I have been told that

such destructive incidents are not uncommon during the training of Adept Questors. You were thinking in terms of how much power you needed to put into the Minor Levity spell, and you multiplied it accordingly. It does not work like that, I am afraid; you really have to feel how much power you need. Do not use Minor Magics as a prop; you must make your own spells."

Grimm nodded, still a little in awe of his new power.

"I have asked your friend, Questor Dalquist, to sit in on some of these sessions when he is available," Crohn said. "He should be able to help you better than I can, because most Questors can cast spells that do not even have physical or Minor Magic equivalents that can be used as a reference."

Grimm brightened; the presence of his friend would make his load easier to bear.

"Often, the same spell may not even have the same chant depending on its use," Crohn intoned, in his habitual Magemaster's bored drone, "and you do not need to learn a thousand inflections and accents as you need to do with Runic magic. It is not very complex, but it may seem more so when your stomach is empty. Let us eat now."

Eating in the Refectory was not such a chore now as it had been, since Grimm was now allowed to sit in the comfortable end reserved for mages and paying Students, and to share their richer menu.

Crohn, always an epicure, maintained that it was necessary for a mage to keep his strength up, and that insipid food dulled the mind as well as the appetite; Grimm did not disagree with him. During his Ordeal, he had not been allowed to associate with Madar and Argand, who had once often helped him to some of their goodies; the monotony of his diet had added to his misery.

As he entered the Refectory, he received respectful, and even friendly, nods from many of the boys there, which he returned with all the grace he could manage; Dalquist's advice to exercise generosity seemed to have proved correct, as many of the boys smiled in relieved response.

Two who did not acknowledge him were Shumal, wearing a bandage around his head and sporting a broken nose and black eyes, and Ruvin, with a splint on one arm and numerous contusions on his face. Grimm considered apologising to these two boys, but he found

this beyond the charity he had shown to the others. They had revelled in their bullying, and Grimm could not find it within himself to forgive them. He hoped dearly that they had learnt a severe lesson and would think twice before picking on another unfortunate.

Dalquist joined them as Grimm was wolfing down a large piece of ham. Grimm worked manfully to swallow, so he could acknowledge his friend, but Dalquist waved a hand at him, encouraging him not to rush his much-needed meal.

"Good morning, Magemaster Crohn," Dalquist said respectfully, "how goes our new Questor?"

"He finally managed his first casting since his Outbreak today," Crohn said, between mouthfuls. He has done well."

"How much damage is there?" Dalquist asked with a knowing smile.

Crohn rolled his eyes. "There is a new hole in the chamber ceiling, and it will be a week before all this plaster and these stone splinters are gone from my robes, but the general intent was there. You Questors may be useful for Guild policy, but you are a menace to clothes and buildings, Questor Dalquist."

"But a friend to tailors and plasterers, eh, Magemaster Crohn?" Dalquist observed.

The Magemaster looked affronted, perhaps at Dalquist's use of vernacular speech, but he said nothing.

"Is it always like this, Dalquist?" Grimm asked before starting on the next slice of ham.

"It's usually a little slower and a little less violent, Grimm, but often messy. It was four months after my breakout before I managed to summon the pattern. Magemaster Urel bade me set fire to a stick for the thirtieth time in a row."

Dalquist chuckled. "He really got annoyed when I cheated and used the Minor Magic chant for Fire, and I snapped back at him. When I succeeded in forming the words, he put me off by laughing at my thought-language; it came out "Shuckle-a-guckle-luckle-duck," which he found rather amusing. As a result, I only charred the stick.

"On the next time I attempted the spell, I vaporised the stick, and it was almost instantly consumed. It cost Urel his eyebrows, and he said he would never again laugh at even a fledgling Questor.

"I was eighteen years old at the time, and I was reckoned a prodigy. You must be-what, nearly fifteen?"

Grimm nodded. "Nearly."

"I predict great things for you, Grimm Afelnor. I wouldn't be surprised if you were Acclaimed Questor next week."

"Well, let us not rush things, Questor Dalquist," Crohn replied. "Nonetheless, I would say that Afelnor has made encouraging

progress. I confidently expect to be alive when he is Acclaimed, as he surely will be. My first Magemaster had been dead for thirty years before my Staff rebounded from the Stone. I must say that it irks me a little." His mouth twisted in a wry smile. "I spent decades of earnest study in pursuit of mastery, only to have some callow adolescent come along to eclipse me. You Questors! I hope you never try to emulate the Weatherworkers; the House could be destroyed by a flood or a tornado."

"Don't worry, Magemaster Crohn," Dalquist drawled, making show of inspecting his immaculate fingernails. "I've never been any good at weather; I lack the touch. It's sad to say, I suppose, but most of a Questor's best spells are destructive. I could destroy a ship with a tempest, but it would require a true Weatherworker to bring a steady breeze to drive one along a channel. If a farmer asked me to summon a gentle rain to water his fields, I would likely swamp his lands."

"I can Heal well enough, but I lack the true intuition of an Acclaimed Healer; cuts, bruises and broken bones are about my limit. We Questors lack finesse in many of these skills, even though we can turn a hand to all of them."

"I've worked for five years to master the summoning of fire so I can safely light a taper one day and blast an ogre into oblivion the next, as required. Of course, unlike most Readers, I learnt the latter case first. Questors need to keep the other Specialists around for the easy, gentle spells."

Grimm had been listening to this exchange with interest. It seemed that a Questor was a man to be reckoned with! He vowed to himself to be the greatest Questor he could be in order to vindicate his vilified grandfather's hopes.

With a start, he realised that he had barely thought of Loras since his accession to the rank of Neophyte. In a panic, he wondered if the memory of his grandparents' faces had faded from his memory and quickly called them up in his mind's eye. The faces were there but somehow blurred, although he still recalled the gentle strength and forbearance of his grandfather. How could such a man have been the foul traitor so despised by the House and by the Guild?

He cleared his throat and spoke hesitantly: "Magemaster Crohn, did you ever know my grandfather? I find it hard to believe that the man I remember could have turned traitor."

Crohn looked a little uncomfortable, but he answered. "Yes. Yes, I did know him, quite well. He was a fine Questor... before his fall. I remain convinced that Loras' acts were prompted by pity for the old Prelate, since I cannot imagine for a single moment that he had senseless, pitiless murder in him. But, as the sage said, 'only by our deeds are we truly known.'"

Grimm nodded. "But you still believe in the truth of his accusation." His voice was level, but he had to fight to keep it so.

"As sad as it is for me to say it," Crohn said, with a sigh, "let any doubts of your grandfather's guilt be gone, Adept Grimm. He fully confessed to his deeds in front of the whole House, and it was Lord Thorn himself, his beloved Brother Mage, who discovered him in the act, with a pillow pressed over the Prelate's face. Lord Thorn was truly sorrowful, almost in tears, and he admitted to astonishment at what his greatest friend had so nearly done, but even he acknowledged Loras' guilt in the end, as did Loras himself."

"His Ordeal... did you take part in it?" Grimm asked, in a soft voice, wondering if some lingering vestige of the Questor's Ordeal had temporarily unhinged his grandfather's mind.

"Yes, I did, Adept Grimm," Crohn admitted. "I was one of those placed under a Geas to taunt him. I did not take part in his despoilment when his powers were stripped from him, but that is of no credit to me, I regret to say. I was only a Neophyte then, and only Acclaimed Mages took part in that Great Spell.

"You even look a little like him, Afelnor; he was seventeen when he was Acclaimed as a Questor, and you have the same deep, dark eyes and those high cheekbones. It is good to think that there will be somebody to redeem the Afelnor name so it may shine again on the Guild rolls. I am sure that both you and he will feel the same."

"Could I yet fail?" Faced with this onerous new burden, Grimm was conscious of his grandmother Drima's last words to him.

"It is possible," Crohn said, "but Questors rarely, if ever, fail once they have broken out."

"Although some who are chosen fail before," Dalquist added, his voice a little blunt. "You know what happened to young Erek and Senior Magemaster Urel. Erek; gentle, artistic Erek, became a deadly, uncontrollable weapon in an instant, blasting Urel into bloody fragments and then hanging himself in shame. On my travels, I have heard that some Neophyte Questors have broken out and have had to be killed to curtail an uncontrollable, destructive rage from which they cannot recover."

Crohn sighed. "I am no admirer of the Ordeal," he said, "but I accept the word of my Prelate that it is a necessary evil. The system is indeed cruel, Questor Dalquist, and the Questor's Ordeal is not lightly imposed. Those boys who fail are looked after by the Guild for as long as they live, whether they recover fully or not. It is a necessary process for the good of the House and of the Guild, however.

"As you know, only a Questor is young and strong enough to pursue the Guild's interest throughout the world. A Reader might die before he could select the correct scroll to save himself from some

immediate threat. No Reader can hope to master the range of magic that a Questor has at his command. Are you saying that you regret being Acclaimed as a Mage Questor?"

Dalquist vehemently shook his head. "I don't regret it at all, Magemaster; it makes the suffering I endured worthwhile. However, I wish with all my heart that another, more humane method could be found to bring out a Questor's skills."

Crohn nodded earnestly. "I know now, at first hand, the cruelty that has to be applied to turn a young boy into a lethal weapon," he said, with a catch in his voice. "However, in the five hundred years since the Guild was founded, no other method has been found, my friends. Many Scholars have tried, but to no avail. In the resurgence of Technology two hundred years ago, the Guild even employed so-called Scientists to research the phenomenon. But these followers of Technology betrayed the Guild's trust. They sought to use the power for their own ends and sought to turn our own against us, that none might oppose them."

Crohn's eyes gleamed with evangelical zeal. "For this," he said, his voice trembling, "and for the destruction they wrought in the Final War, we revile them. We visit suffering on a few boys every decade so we may remain watchful for the resurgence of that vile art, and for the risk of that woe and anguish being visited on the world. Questors are the strong right arm of the Guild."

"Does the Ordeal leave heavy scars on a Questor's mind, Magemaster Crohn?" Grimm asked, worried by the Magemaster's vehemence. "Wounds deep enough to warp a man's mind to murder? I would hate to think that I might be possessed to kill."

"Of course, scars are left. But, believe me, you would not now be undergoing further training if the Healer had not pronounced you healthy in body, mind and spirit. Nor would your grandfather Loras have been trained after his Outbreak, had he not been assessed as fully recovered."

"As for killing, there will be times as a Questor when you will have to destroy men, sometimes without a moment's thought."

Dalquist nodded gravely. "I have some... personal experience of this, Grimm. If you kill, and you will, you must always do so with a clear conscience, or you will destroy yourself with remorse and self-doubt. This is part of the training you will receive; how to act without deliberation, how to identify the solution to a problem without thinking."

Dalquist's mouth twisted a little. "I have no more love for murder than you do, Grimm. But, on a few occasions, I have had to kill men. Even though they would have killed me without a moment's thought, I do often think of this. Nevertheless, had I hesitated for an instant, I

know in my heart that I would not be here now, leaving evildoers free to spread their filth around the land and to despoil it as they chose. Only the training I received as a Guild Questor allowed me to see the true path and to act as necessary for the good of the House and the Guild."

Grimm shivered at the thought of killing in cold blood.

"There, I'm disturbing you," Dalquist said, a lop-sided smile on his face. "Don't brood on this, just do what you know to be right; do as you are taught and you will prevail. Take pride that you will be a Questor and that you will make the right decisions. The Guild has placed its trust in you that you will do this, and so have I. You have a good heart, and I know enough of you to know that you would never kill for cruel or evil purposes."

"I will try with all my heart never to betray the trust placed in me by the Guild and by you, Brother Mages," Grimm declared with fervent intensity. He had faced mindless, murderous rage during his Outbreak, and he had sworn never again to let it take control of him. "I do want to be a true Questor, and I'll face the more difficult decisions as best I can."

"That is all that anyone can ask of you, Adept Grimm. Come, now, your meal is getting cold. Eat up, and we will go back to work. There is a lot of work to do before you even need to think of difficult decisions. We must go back to concentrate on your control, and allow you to develop your thought-language further."

After his morning session with Crohn, the Magemaster informed Grimm that a room was being prepared for him in the West Wing, the traditional haunt of Adepts and mages-in residence.

"Afelnor, although you are still technically a ward of the Scholasticate," he said, "it is not deemed proper for an Adept to remain in a Student's accommodation. I think you will appreciate the difference in your circumstances. Please follow me."

Grimm had passed the West Wing corridor at least twice a day for nine years, but he had never dreamed of entering it. It seemed strange to be turning right to go into the West Wing instead of going straight on to the Refectory, left to the Library, or to his own cell.

The walls of the corridor were tastefully panelled in dark, polished wood, and Grimm noted portraits of former Prelates of the House and prominent former mages. The entry corridor opened up

into a wide, brightly lit area, tiled in alternating black and white marble in an echo of the Great Hall.

Crohn led him to an oak-panelled door. "This is your new domicile, Afelnor." The Magemaster opened the door and motioned the Adept inside.

Grimm gaped at the opulence of the room in comparison to the dingy, sparse cell that had been his home for most of his life. The bed was twice the size of that to which he had been accustomed, with a thick mattress, two generously proportioned pillows and a gold-tasselled crimson bedspread. On one side of the room was a large dressing-table with a large mirror. In one corner was a hipbath, and in the other stood a large bookshelf, already well-stocked with various works.

Grimm examined the titles: Advanced Meditation; The Questor Phenomenon; Power Control and Application for Adepts were but a few of the titles. Grimm raised an eyebrow in question.

"I remembered that you enjoy reading, Afelnor," Crohn said, "so I took the liberty of including a few titles that might be relevant to the work you will be doing. Do not worry; there are a few more recreational titles as well. You may also bring any single book from the Library to your room, provided that you replace it before removing another."

Luxury, thought Grimm. Something to read in my own bed at night, other than the damned Rules!

"I do not imagine that you will have much to bring from your old cell," the Magemaster said with a smile. "But you may wish to spend a little time looking at it and bidding it a not-so-fond farewell. If you would like to go now, I will wait for you at the end of the charity corridor. I hope you will understand that a new Adept Questor who has not yet mastered his power needs constant supervision."

Remembering the destruction of the classroom, Grimm acknowledged the wisdom of constant, close scrutiny. "Thank you, Magemaster Crohn," he said. "It will take a little time to become used to this, but I believe I will be able to do so."

The bed on which he had lain every night for almost a decade seemed impossibly small now. Grimm's eyes took in its impeccably-folded bedroll resting in its assigned space at the head; the misted mirror with its crazed pitcher and washbasin, both spotless and neatly

laid out; the rickety bookshelf, which had exceeded his expectations by remaining attached to the wall for nine years, and its single occupant. His eyes misted, and he realised that the cramped room had been his whole world for as long as he could remember. Almost everything he owned was in his pockets, and there was nothing appealing about this place, but it had been his home for most of his life.

Now, this room would be used by some other poor, homesick, lonely Student. He vowed to look up the next room's incumbent as soon as the new Scholasticate year began. With a sigh, he shook himself down and left the cell, almost to be knocked down by what seemed to be a brown-robed meteor.

"Disturbing the peace and meditation of other Students; a breach of Rule 1.16.4, I'll be bound," Grimm chided. "The penalty is two missed meals and a public penance, I believe."

The boy, a fair-headed lad of maybe nine years, paled. "I'm sorry, Lord Mage," he whispered, chastened.

Grimm put a hand on the Student's shoulder. "If you don't say anything about it, then maybe I won't, either. Just think next time; I could have been Senor Magemaster Crohn, and he'd have handed you your head on a platter. As it is, he's waiting at the end of the corridor, so watch out."

The boy nodded, his eyes wide. "Thank you, Lord Mage," he whispered.

"My name is Grimm. I'm not a full mage yet, but I'm working on it; work hard, and you could be one, too," Grimm advised.

I just hope you never have to become a Questor, he thought. If I'd known what was involved, I might have begged for the scullery.

With a decisive air, he turned on his heel and strode to the far end of the corridor. "I'm ready, Magemaster Crohn."

"Did I just hear the sound of a transgression of Rule 1.16.4, by any chance?" Crohn, who missed nothing, asked.

Grimm shrugged. "I merely tripped in the corridor. It was nothing. Please, may we go to the Refectory? I am very hungry."

Chapter 25: "This Adept is Dead"

Grimm stood and raised his arms. At sixteen years of age, he was well over six feet in height, and he bore a strong, dark beard. He was slender and yet he looked powerful. Despite his simple robes, he had begun to assume an air of majesty and grandeur. His face was intent and confident as he summoned his powers.

"Skeykak!"

The rock rose three feet above the table and hovered, motionless.

"J'asshaugh!"

The rock began to glow, its colour ranging through dull red, scarlet, orange and finally straw-yellow.

"Shakh J'haggagh l'yet'yeh!"

The rock flew into a million glowing fragments, only to be collected in an invisible net.

"Ghagh'et!"

The fragments coalesced again into a cooling rock.

Grimm sighed, and the smoking rock dropped back to the table.

"Aghheye!"

From mid-air came a stream of water, which doused the rock, swathing it in steam as it cracked in half. Muttering inaudibly in his private language, Grimm picked up one fist-sized fragment in his slender hand and crushed it to powder.

"That was excellent, Afelnor!" Crohn crowed. "Superb! I am finished with you now. The rest is up to you alone. You only need to master one more skill and you will be an Acclaimed Questor, the first in this house for nearly ten years. Wait one moment."

Crohn left the room, returned after a few minutes with a rough tree branch, perhaps seven feet in length and as thick as Grimm's arm. "You must form this into a true Mage Staff," he said.

Grimm looked blank, but Crohn waved his hands. "I cannot teach you how to do this. It is your own journey of discovery."

Grimm looked at the stout, misshapen lump of lifeless wood, feeling utterly lost. The branch looked nothing like a slender, perdurable Mage Staff, such as the one Crohn carried.

"Adept Grimm, you already know more than most Acclaimed Mages who have ever left this Scholasticate. You have mastered Elemental, Destructive, Additive and Self-Acting powers; my education of you is at an end. Education, as you know, merely means a 'leading out'. I have taught you nothing, but have led out what is within you, and given you the scope to direct it and control it.

"When you have made the staff with your own hands and imbued it with your essence, you will be a mage. A Mage Staff is a deeply

personal item, and you must give it a name. My staff is called Mist, after a favourite pony I rode as a child. You must choose a name for your own, but you must not tell it to anybody until it has survived three full-blooded strikes on the Breaking Stone.

"A Mage Staff is a Guild Mage's faithful and constant companion; should it ever be lost, a mage can bring it to hand by an effort of will.

"An uninvited touch by another on a Mage Staff, even with a gloved hand, brings an avid bite; a blow will cause far more injury than any plain wooden rod.

"It cannot break or splinter as long as the mage is alive. It can ward off certain kinds of malevolence, and it can be made to bear passive spells cast on it by the mage who owns it. Thus, for example, it can be left as a ward to alert the mage of approaching danger as he sleeps."

"But how can I make this staff, Magemaster Crohn?" Grimm pleaded. "I cannot see in my mind how to make these powers manifest themselves in a dumb lump of wood."

"I made my staff in seven months," declared Crohn, displaying his own, gleaming staff with apparent pride, "forming it through the use of spells that I had memorised, and keeping it by my side at all times. I talked to it and put what I could of myself into it. I finally managed to seal the staff with a spell of Keeping. I did not imbue the staff with all its attributes, but somehow I knew what to do. It is the true bonding of the mage with his staff that makes it what it is; no man can perform the bonding for you. I have borne my staff with me for many years now, and, when I die, my essence will live on in it after me. I was told no more than you by my own, long-dead Magemaster, but I succeeded with far less power at my disposal than you have."

He ran his hand lovingly over the silk-smooth, yet unworn wood of his black staff. "If there is one thing in this world I can truly call my own, it is this."

Grimm nodded, eyeing the gleaming black rod and its seven gold rings with a little envy.

"When your Mage Staff is complete," Crohn said, "you will know. On that day, you will leave the Scholasticate and strike the staff three times across the Breaking Stone in the main hall in the presence of your peers and elders. The Breaking Stone is preternaturally hard and sharp-edged; no ordinary piece of wood could remain unbroken after such treatment. You should be aware that the least weakness in the bond between you and your staff will cause it to break on the Stone; you must be more focused and diligent in this last task than in any other you have ever undertaken."

Grimm had not the least idea of what might be required of him, but he asked, "And if I am successful at the Stone?"

Crohn shrugged. "Should you and the staff prevail, you will be Acclaimed as a Guild Mage and given the Guild Ring, which only you can remove from your finger.

"Go now and start work on your own staff, and come to see me when you are ready. You may use any of the grimoires in the Library, and you may use any spells that you have memorised, or any that you can formulate with your spell-language; the results will be the same, whatever spells you choose. Only complete dedication to your task will bring the desired result.

"I will await your return with eagerness. Certainly, you may see Questor Dalquist or me at any other time, but ask nothing of creating the staff, for none of us can tell you what to do. This will be your own work, and only yours. I wish you clarity in your thoughts, Grimm Afelnor. This is your room now, and no other may enter, upon my order."

Crohn gave a hesitant half-bow and left Grimm with the piece of wood.

Grimm ran his hands along the rough wood and gauged how it would cleave, trying to ascertain the form of the staff beneath the bark. He sat in silence for perhaps an hour; probing, feeling, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the material.

"I dub you Redeemer," Grimm muttered. "Together, we will work to redeem my family name."

Then, in a single, decisive motion, he drew his penknife, one of his few personal possessions, and began to carve. He was careful to remove the minimum amount of material at each stroke and, after each, he re-assessed the wood. He began to feel the grain structure, where the knots might be, the shape of the supple, strong heartwood.

The rumbling of his stomach awakened him to the fact that several hours had passed. He looked down at his feet and saw a pile of small shavings that would have to be cleaned up, and he felt a little surprised at his progress. However, the staff remained just a rough piece of wood, and no magic resonated within it. How was he to imbue it with all the powers it was meant to attain? The completion of Crohn's staff, Mist, had taken seven months, but Grimm had consistently outperformed Crohn's expectations before; he hoped that he would continue to do so.

He realised he was very tired and hungry, and he shuffled off to the Refectory with the rough, fledgling staff, vowing that Redeemer would never leave his side for a moment until his Acclamation, no matter when that might be. He sat alone as he ate, but he felt no loneliness. Soon, he would be leaving the Scholasticate and venturing into the wide world outside. With a start, he realised that he could remember next to nothing of the regions outside these walls, of which

he had seen nothing for nine years. Was it really that long? The concept seemed to mock him, and he shivered, realising that the Scholasticate was his home and his whole world. He slept fitfully that night, the staff at his side. In his dreams, he stood, teetering, on the brink of a vertiginous cliff.

For the next month, Grimm flitted like a brown bat around the Scholasticate with his dormant staff. Some days, he spent hours shaping and whittling, or even just softly taking to the dead piece of wood. He forged the staff's brass shoes on his own, annealing copper and zinc ingots with his magic and allowing them to shrink onto the gleaming wood as they cooled. To his immense pleasure, they were a perfect fit.

At other times, he spent his time in the library, steeping himself in the grimoires and librams once denied him, but which were now his friends. On occasion, he would talk to his human friends, Madar, Argand and Dalquist, but his mind was elsewhere, reaching forward in time to his Acclamation and freedom.

The staff was warm to Grimm's touch, blending seamlessly with his hand. He had poured formless energy into it night and day for three months and, it now vibrated gently at his touch, like the purring of a contented cat. He placed it on the floor and walked ten paces.

"Staff, to hand," he muttered in plain language, without touching his deeper power, and the staff flew to his outstretched right palm, fitting it with intimate closeness. With a deep breath, he moved away to Crohn's cell and tapped at the door, even though he knew well the lateness of the hour.

The dishevelled Magemaster looked haggard and peeved, standing shivering in a long night-gown. "Could it not wait until the morning, Afelnor?" he groaned.

"My staff is finished, Senior Magemaster Crohn." Grimm could barely control the eagerness in his voice. "I am ready for my test at the Breaking Stone." He held the brass-shod staff before him, and it

glowed with blue balefire.

Crohn's eyes bulged, suddenly wide-awake. "I agree," he breathed. "I can feel the magic in your staff, and it seems well attuned to you."

He wagged an admonitory finger at Grimm. "I trust you have done your work as well as I believe you can. For tomorrow, you will have to prove your staff against the Breaking Stone; only that severe test can prove the bond between you. Failure will mean more months of work before you can try again."

Looking at the drawn Grimm, he put a friendly hand on the youth's right shoulder. "You must go to bed, Adept Grimm. Of course, you have now condemned me to a sleepless night, for I must summon a Conclave to witness the event. But I would not miss it for the world. Say nothing to anybody else, not even your closest friends. Sleep now, for you must be up with the cockcrow. Go now."

Grimm felt too tired to argue; he had expected a greater reaction from Crohn, but all he wanted now was sleep.

It seemed he had closed his eyes only minutes before, but here was Doorkeeper, arrayed in stiff, formal robes that Grimm had never before seen him wearing.

"Ten minutes, Grimm Afelnor; ten minutes and no more!" crowed the major-domo. "You must be ready for their Lordships. Wear this robe; your own grandfather wore the same robe at his own Acclamation. Don't speak. Wash! Hurry now!"

Doorkeeper seemed no different from the man the seven-year-old Grimm had met on his first day, apart from the fact that Grimm now overtopped him by six inches. He flitted around the cell like a frightened mouse, chattering in the brief staccato phrases that Grimm recognised so well.

"The staff! Don't forget the staff; I can't touch it now, can I? Quickly, put your robe on. Tie your hair. Look, I'll do it. There. Tidy your beard a little, do!

"Oh, leave it, then. Come on, quickly now."

They hurried down the corridor leading to the gate to the Great Hall, a gate that had been locked to Grimm for the last nine years, and Doorkeeper flung it wide with a flourish. Grimm hesitated for a moment, and then stepped through, suddenly nervous and a little giddy at the wide open space of the Great Hall. A host of formally robed wizards stood ranged around the Breaking Stone, with Thorn

standing apart.

In a huge voice, the Prelate cried, "Behold: an Adept approaches!" "An Adept approaches," echoed the hooded mages.

Motioned to the stone, Grimm stood before the Guild Master, suppressing the trembling that threatened to control him, and he spoke as Crohn had taught him.

"I offer this House my utmost allegiance and fealty unto death," he said, pleased that his voice was clear and strong. "A simple Adept beseeches elevation to the degree of Mage. I beg your indulgence."

Thorn stood aside from the stone. "Welcome, Adept," he intoned. "By a true staff forged by will and sorcery is a Guild Mage known. A lifeless token of wood and metal forged in the supplicant's own soul, formed into an extension of his will."

Grimm stepped up to the stone, drew his breath and raised the staff above his head.

"It's just you and me now, Redeemer," he muttered. "Please don't let me down."

If it breaks, you'll have to do it all over again, hissed a renegade part of his mind, and you'll lose face in front of all these mages.

Shut up, Grimm ordered his wayward alter ego. They're only men. And we won't fail.

He hesitated until the tension seemed unbearable, and then brought Redeemer, the painful labour of the last few months, crashing down on the magically-sharp edge of the stone. Blue sparks flew, but no splinter or crack appeared in the staff.

That's one; twice more, and we're there. Just remember that plenty fail on the second blow; three-quarters, as I remember...

With all his strength, Grimm brought the staff down again, and the hall rang. Still, the black wood seemed whole and undamaged, and Grimm's heart beat like a trip-hammer.

Well done; we're almost there. There are still no guarantees, you know. Many Adepts...

Not waiting for his treacherous inner voice to continue, Grimm put all his rage and fury into the final blow, slamming his staff onto the ebon ridge and showering the whole hall with blue motes.

Clangggg...

...and the staff remained whole: perfect, a living structure that seemed to resonate and rejoice in Grimm's hands.

Without stopping to think, Grimm slammed the brass foot of the staff on the flagstones, an impact that sent a further blizzard of blue magic-stuff throughout the hall, and he flung his arms wide in pure, unalloyed ecstasy. With his pounding heart threatening to burst from his chest, he spoke the ritual words that Crohn had taught him, his voice trembling only a little: "With my own hands and my own mind, I

fashioned this thing of lifeless wood and gave it life and a name: Redeemer. As it has been written, so let it be; to all present, I declare myself a true mage!"

The members of the assembly banged their own staves in similar fashion and chanted, "This Adept is dead. A Guild Mage rises in his place!"

Grimm looked at the assembled ranks of mages and saw a smiling Crohn, a cheerfully-nodding Kargan, and an enthusiastically-beaming Dalquist.

Thorn stepped forward and intoned gravely, "Behold a true Mage and Brother of this House. Let him be known from this day forth as a master of our Craft, and a bearer of our ring. We hail Grimm Afelnor a Mage, a Questor of the First Rank, and we honour him as true kin."

Thorn turned to Grimm, and held out a gold-tasselled cushion bearing a large and ornate ring. In a quiet voice he said, "It is your grandfather's ring, Questor Grimm: it was his wish that you take it and redeem the honour of the name of Afelnor in the eyes of this House."

Grimm took the blue-and-gold ring with care and slid it on to his ring finger. At first too loose, it swiftly conformed to the circumference of his finger.

For a moment, he stared at his adorned digit, at the ring that meant all his struggles had been worthwhile. Then, he remembered his lines.

"I swear to this House loyalty and fealty unto death," he cried, restraining hot tears that hovered at the margins of his eyes. "I swear to uphold the tenets of our Guild and its precepts and laws. I swear to you, my beloved Brothers, love and friendship to the end of my days. I swear tolerance and understanding, and I pledge never to misuse the powers granted me by the beneficence of this House and its servants."

"Hail, Grimm Afelnor! True Mage and Brother of this House!" the conclave chanted in rapturous chorus. Thorn rapped his staff thrice on the flagstones, and the ceremony was at an end.

Dalquist rushed up to Grimm and shook him firmly by the hand. "Congratulations, Grimm. You are indeed a precocious little guttersnipe!"

"Careful, Brother Mage; we Questors are dangerous," Grimm replied in mock warning, and then he added, more seriously, as the older mage clapped him on the upper arm, "Watch out for Redeemer!"

"Oh, a Mage Staff can't hurt anyone while you're holding it and conscious," Dalquist replied. "That is, not unless you want it to! By the way, there's a banquet being laid on for you in the upper gallery. You and Crohn are guests of honour, of course. I'm afraid you'll have to say a few words."

"Don't worry about me, Dalquist. Even Faffel gave me satisfactory

marks in Courtly Presentation and Public Speaking; eventually. At least this time I won't have a bunch of Scholars sticking out tongues and pulling faces when the Magemaster isn't looking."

"As I remember my Acclamation, there wasn't much Courtly Presentation about it," Dalquist drawled. "It can get rather hectic with twenty drunken Mages trying to outdo each other in magic. Questors are meant to be the worst, as you can guess. Readers are worried that someone could memorise their chants, so they tend to hide their best magic. Questors don't have to worry about that: your spell-language is useless to anyone else. The only Questors here today are you, me, Thorn and old Olaf Demonscurge. He's a laugh when he's had a drink or two; eighty years as a Questor has taught him a lot of subtlety and a lot of magic. He may be a little hard on you, what with your being a virgin Mage of the First Rank, without even one ring on your staff."

Kargan stepped up. "Excuse me, Questor Dalquist. Afelnor, you low toad! I suppose you won't be bothering much with singing, now that you're a high and mighty Questor? No time for Runes anymore, I'll wager."

"I still do use runic magic from time to time, Magemaster Kargan," Grimm protested. "Sometimes, it is much easier to use a memorised spell than think of a new one. And I still like to sing for the pleasure of it."

"Glad to hear it... Grimm, isn't it? Even your execrable warble is better than the tuneless twittering I have to put up with in the dross they send in these days. In the new batch they've sent me, they're all absolutely ghastly. However, you are all equally unworthy in my sight; current company moderately excepted, of course."

"Why thank you, Brother Mage, you're too kind," Grimm said. "I will try to prove myself reasonably deserving of your moderate acceptance of my slight worth."

"You and I will have to do a duet at the banquet, Questor Grimm," Kargan said, his face brightening. "'The Coronation of Meliar' would be rather fitting, I feel. You take the tenor, and I'll take the baritone."

"Will we get away with that in company like this, Magemaster Kargan?" Grimm asked in disbelief. The general ban on singing in the Scholasticate still rang in his mind.

"No holds barred at these things, Questor Grimm. They'll all start singing sooner or later, and most of them can't hold a note better than you can hold a breeze in a shrimping-net. We'll just have to show them how it's really done; by now, they almost expect it of me. You'll have to do a party turn of some sort, of course. Come on, it won't be so difficult when you've had a few glasses of wine."

"But I've never taken strong drink before," Grimm said, worried. "What if I disgrace myself?"

"Then you won't be the first. Gobol there keels over at the merest whiff of alcohol. In any case, if you feel your head start to spin, cast some un-Runish Questor perversion of a cantrip of Stability on yourself, followed by a charm of Clarity."

"Why not a single chant of Equilibrium, or at least as near as I can get to it?" Grimm asked.

"That's not the easiest chant when you're sober, let alone when you've had a few," said Kargan, snorting. "One misplaced syllable and you'll be throwing up for days. Safer my way, believe me. Actually, even better, cast the spells on your staff. Then you can just clutch it tight when you feel like you're slipping away. I spent a month casting them into my staff so that they'd always be there when I needed them. I'll tell you what; I'll do it for you. It should last you for tonight. With your permission?"

Grimm felt horrified at this use of this mighty wizard's weapon and symbol of power to stave off drunkenness, but he acquiesced as Kargan threw back his long sleeves and began to chant. The chant took several minutes, and Grimm realized with a cold shock that he, as a Mage Questor, could probably have performed the spell in a matter of a few heartbeats. "There, that should last you a few hours," Kargan said. "I'll see you later."

Up stepped old Olaf Demonscourge. "So, you are the new Questor. Congratulations, young Afelnor." The old man held Grimm at arms' length, inspecting him as if he were suspect livestock. "It is always good to have new blood, so that our line continues, even if you are a bit of a skinny devil. I will see you at the banquet later; make sure you feed yourself up, get some flesh onto those bones of yours. Oh, by the way, if you become intoxicated, have a word with me. I have a few spells that may help in that regard."

"Thank you, Questor Olaf, I appreciate your kind offer," Grimm said, deeming it politic not to spurn the old man's offer.

Grimm's next visitor, hot on the heels of Olaf, was Magemaster Crohn. "Congratulations, Brother Mage. You have made the aches and pains I have had since your breakout all worthwhile, and I am sure that you will acquit yourself well. May I inquire after the Demonscourge's advice to you?"

"Oh, he was just offering to help me if I get drunk," Grimm replied, ruefully.

"If you can remember your rune magic, you can do that for yourself, Questor Grimm. Just cast a spell of--"

"I know this, Magemaster Crohn. Magemaster Kargan was telling me about it. My staff will look after me. Is this really what being a mage is all about? Getting drunk and then passing it off so that we can drink even more?"

"Not all Acclamations are quite this frenetic, Questor Grimm. It is rare that we have cause to greet the arrival of a new Questor. The last such celebration was for your friend Dalquist, and that was nearly ten years ago. It makes a change to doff the stern, magely visage occasionally. As you can see, some of us do it with abandon.

"All men are boys at heart, Questor Grimm. Many of those here have little longer to live, not excluding myself, so please forgive us these petty indulgences. You are allowed to have fun sometimes, you know. I told you that your Ordeal was over, and so it is. This will go some way to assuaging those lingering scars, so I expect you to express yourself freely for once. The banqueting gallery is well protected by magic, so we do not expect any major damage... just take care that whatever you say to another does not come back to haunt you when sanity returns to you tomorrow morning. A little jesting with even the most senior mage is acceptable, but outright insults or challenges will not be forgotten. Remember; in with the wine, out with the wit."

"Don't worry, Magemaster Crohn, I will be prudent." In fact, Grimm did not intend to drink more than the minimum amount required to satisfy protocol.

The hubbub of conversation from the gathered mages softened as Thorn raised a hand and called for silence.

"Brother Mages, if I may have your attention, we shall now prepare to the gallery hall to celebrate our new brother's Acclamation."

As Grimm ascended the staircase to the upper floor, the acerbic Magemaster Faffel clutched Grimm's shoulder. "Be careful what you drink, Afelnor. You are not used to it, and it may ill affect you. Your deportment is not ideal at the best of times."

Grimm bit back an acid comment. Since his triumph at the Breaking Stone, the only talk had seemed to be concerned with the excess consumption of alcohol! He managed a civil reply.

The table was large and circular, and it easily seated the assembled group. Seating was largely egalitarian and by personal choice, except that Thorn was seated on an ornate throne. The Prelate instructed Grimm to sit on his right and Crohn, the tutor of the new Questor, on his left. Dalquist sat to the left of Grimm, and Kargan to the left of Dalquist.

When all were seated, servants placed goblets in front of each

mage. Thorn stood and banged his staff on the floor.

"A toast to the new mage: Grimm Afelnor!"

"Grimm Afelnor," chorused the other mages, and all drank deeply. Grimm initially sipped at his wine with caution, but he found the taste pleasant. He drank a little more: a warmth grew within him, but he quickly assayed his senses and found them still his own.

So much for the terrible demon lurking within drink! Grimm thought, and he drained his goblet with some pleasure. It was instantly refilled.

Dalquist nudged Grimm. "You must make a speech, Grimm. Keep it short."

With only a trace of nervousness, Grimm stood and addressed the conclave. "Brother Mages, I thank you all for attending my Acclamation." His mouth was dry, so he took another healthy swig of wine.

"I am heartily thankful for the opportunities I have been given, and the c-confidence placed in me by our G-guild. I look forward to a long and profitable service in the ways of our... our Craft and our Guild. I would like to raise a toast to the Craft of Thaumaturgy."

"The Craft!" Grimm drank once more, this time draining his goblet. His head still seemed clear, although there was a slight ringing in his ears. He thought to use the magic in his staff but decided that he was well enough. A little unsteadily, he sat down.

Crohn took up the baton. "I have never coached a more diligent or powerful scholar than Grimm Afelnor. In nine brief years, he has passed from my lowly Student to my Brother Mage. His Acclamation is the pinnacle of my years in the Scholasticate, and I feel sure that our brother, Grimm Afelnor, will bring great credit to our Guild, and to our illustrious Prelate: I raise a toast to our Lord Prelate, Thorn Virias!"

"Lord Prelate Thorn!" More drink. Grimm saw that his goblet was empty again, and it was swiftly refilled.

Then Kargan stood. "My erstwhile pupil in Runes and Chanting, Grimm Afelnor, will join me in singing the old duet 'The Coronation of Meliar'; your best attention, please."

Grimm stood, although he now felt an unaccountable lassitude in his legs. Perhaps the last few strenuous days had taken their toll on him, after all. He drained another goblet of wine and shook his head as if to dash away the spots that suddenly filled his vision. This was a mistake, since the room appeared to lag a little behind his gaze as his head moved; a brief spasm of nausea clenched Grimm's entrails, but it soon passed.

Kargan began the baritone part of the familiar song, and Grimm joined in at the appropriate time with a confident tenor. He was aware

that his voice slurred just a little on some of the more difficult syllables, but not enough to notice, he thought.

When the duet was finished, there was an uproarious burst of enthusiastic applause, and Grimm and Kargan bowed. Grimm's head spun, and the new Questor made to sit back down. However, he managed to miss his seat entirely, and he sprawled on the floor. There was tumultuous laughter, in which Grimm joined immoderately, hoisting himself back into the seat.

Another drink...

Feeling giddy, but confident and carefree, he stood again, clumsily, and said, "Watch this!"

He spread his arms and chanted: "Skeyhak'te shaha'ghe n'yet!"

A thousand glittering bubbles appeared in the air and drifted through the room to bounce off the walls and then break, each emitting a musical note.

He laughed, pleased by the success of his impromptu spell. With an unsteady hand, he lifted his goblet from the table and made to raise it to his lips again. However, it fell from his nerveless fingers, the table rose up towards his face, and blackness came.

When pained consciousness returned to Grimm, fewer people sat at the table, and the sun was low in the sky. Discarded scraps of food littered the table, and black marks and misty outlines on the draperies and wood panelling showed that some ill-controlled magic had been at work.

Lord Thorn had left, and Faffel, who had warned Grimm against immoderation, sat with his head back and snored raucously, a toppled goblet before him.

Several other mages showed no more sign of life than the Magemaster, although some were still engaged in hearty drinking, with no apparent ill effects.

"More drink, Brother Questor?" Dalquist asked, grinning, who seemed to be among the ranks of the unafflicted.

"Don' feel well." Grimm forced the words out with some difficulty; he wanted to say more, but the effort was too great. Dalquist just had time to push a bowl under Grimm's chin before the new mage vomited copious amounts of red-brown liquid into it.

"Skuguchne!" Dalquist muttered: the noisome contents of the bowl vanished. "Feel better now, Questor Grimm?"

"Bit," slurred Grimm, his tongue feeling like a dry lump of wood. "Do' wanna drink wine again-ever." Grimm had never felt worse in his life. "Please... jus' lemme die, Da'quisst."

Kargan leaned across the table. "Remember your staff, Questor Grimm." Grimm leaned forward to pick up Redeemer, and then wished he had not, as the room seemed to give an alarming lurch backwards.

"Staff, c'm 'ere," he slurred, and the staff flew to his hand like a trained falcon. As soon as Grimm clutched it, the room stopped spinning and his aching head cleared. A rising hammering and ringing ran through his head, reaching an almost unbearable crescendo before it dissipated. He gave a shuddering sigh.

"That's better." Grimm sighed. "I'm sorry about that, brothers."

His mouth tasted vile, so he took a deep draught from a carafe of water at his side, without waiting to decant the contents into a glass or goblet. Realising that this was a breach of decorum, he shot a quick glance at Magemaster Faffel, but the acid-tongued tutor still seemed nestled in the comforting arms of Morpheus.

"A good lesson, eh, Brother Mage?" said the ever-cheerful Kargan. "A good friend but an awful enemy is drink; a giver of confidence, but a thief of capability. Sometimes it's handy to be a mage, though. There are those in the wide world who would give their eye-teeth to be able to dismiss a hangover as easily as that.

"However, I have a word of caution for you. Too much drink can do great damage as well as giving you a sore head. Curing the hangover doesn't get rid of the damage, and even a Healer might be hard pressed to repair the deeper ravages of drink. Some forget this and drink like there's no tomorrow, and they end up as demented wretches with ravaged bodies, lacking the lesson the hangover brings."

"I have no intention of ever drinking alcohol again," Grimm said fervently. "It's a horrible thing to lose control of oneself."

"You may disagree when you're a bit older, Grimm," Dalquist said. "There are times when alcohol can be a great comfort; but remember that 'moderation in all things' is part of a mage's credo."

"Try some of this compote, Questor Grimm," Kargan urged. "It will line your stomach, so you may be ready for more drink."

"What was that about moderation, Magemaster Kargan?" Grimm asked.

"Moderation in all things-only in moderation!" The elder mage, wearing his manic grin, helped himself to another flagon of wine and a brace of chicken legs. Recognising when he was beaten, Grimm surrendered again to the feast. This time, he kept Redeemer within easy reach.

Chapter 26: The Smith and the Sorcerer

The year ended with Grimm in a kind of limbo. He was a Questor, with his black, cowed robe, his unbreakable staff and his blue-gold Guild ring, but he had no Quests to his name as yet; the lack of even a single gold ring on Redeemer marked him as a tyro. His training with Crohn had worked to build up his speed of thought, his willpower and his decisiveness, but he felt quite unable to make up his mind as to what to do with his time.

He wandered through the main entrance hall with its dome of stars, soft thought-music and the pyramidal, obsidian Breaking Stone. Looking around to check that he was alone, he dropped a piece of paper onto the stone's sloping edge. The sheet barely shivered as it split into two, sundered under its own weight.

He then took a double-handed grip on Redeemer and swung it with all his might against the magically sharp and unyielding surface. A ringing sound and a shower of blue sparks were emitted, but Redeemer was as sound as ever. He smiled a little in mild satisfaction, and wandered listlessly back to his room in the West Wing.

"Questor Grimm, you are just the man I was looking for! Do you have a moment?" Grimm turned at the unmistakable voice of Doorkeeper.

"Mage Doorkeeper, what may I do for you on this fine morning?" Grimm spoke with an exuberance he did not feel.

"I am going on a visit to some relatives in Taddleton today, Questor Grimm," Doorkeeper said brightly. "I wondered if you might like to accompany me."

Taddleton lay a scant quarter-mile from the village of Lower Frunstock where Grimm had been raised... a quarter-mile from the grandparents for whom he had spared barely a thought these six years past, he realised with a guilty start.

"Of course I'd like to, Doorkeeper," he said. "When are you thinking of leaving?"

"Would an hour or so from now suit you?" asked the ancient mage.

Grimm gulped. Things seemed to happen so quickly these days; he had not left the Scholasticate for nine years, and he was barely used to being allowed free access to the West Wing and the Great Hall. Now, Doorkeeper was talking about leaving the House. Grimm thought about it, and nearly fainted from an agoraphobic pang that seized his brain in sharp, icy talons. A part of him wanted to scream in

refusal, to grasp onto his familiar world and never to let go. Another region of his mind had control of his mouth, however.

"I'd love to, Doorkeeper," he heard himself say. "I shall have to ask Magemaster Crohn for permission, of course. Do you know his whereabouts?"

"I observed him making his rounds of the Student accommodation block about five minutes ago. I believe that he should still be there, Questor Grimm." The old mage's tone was formal and deferent.

Grimm smiled. "Doorkeeper, you're like family to me. I've known you for over half my life and I think I might have lost my mind a long time ago, without you to bring a little order and stability to my world. I haven't changed overnight just because I carry this stick. Please, Doorkeeper; just call me 'Grimm', and drop the Mage Speech? It makes me uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry, Qu... Grimm," the major-domo said, beaming. "I do have to struggle to see you as that frightened, wet thing I first met all those years ago. You have changed a lot, whether you know it or not. You look... confident, powerful, somehow."

"I don't feel like that, Doorkeeper," Grimm declared. "I'm quaking inside at the thought of even stepping outside the House, and I need the old Doorkeeper I know and love to help me with my fears, just like he used to when I was a frightened Student. I know you think sometimes that you're in some way inferior to some of the other mages, but you have a vital role here. You help poor, insignificant Students cope with a strange new world so they can adjust and grow; a vital responsibility that allows the House to continue. Be that mage for me again, please. You helped me to adjust to this world so well that it scares me to think of anything else. I'm terrified."

Doorkeeper ran a hand through his luxuriant, white hair and grinned. "Maybe I can still see a trace of that small, drenched little waif I met in the Great Hall all those years ago; even if you are a real Mage Questor."

"I'm still me, Doorkeeper." Grimm felt a hollow void where his stomach had once been. "There's a big world out there I haven't seen for most of my life, and I'm... I'm scared."

"Ah, you're not the first youngster to face that problem, you know," Doorkeeper replied. "It's funny how most of the Students here would do anything to escape but, once they're free to come and go as they please, they just want to hang on to it. Especially the charity boys like you; at least the rest get out for a short while every year. I can't make you feel any better right now, but I will tell you that when you come back you'll be utterly changed. I'm very happy for you, and I won't feel that you're really one of my flock until I greet you properly as a returning mage."

"I think that's what I'm looking forward to most, Doorkeeper," said Grimm. "At least it'll mean I've really done something for the House, instead of taking from it. I wonder if you could cast a spell of Inner Calm on me. One of the limitations of Questor magic is that I can't act on my own mind, because that's where the magic comes from."

"Oh, no, no, no, young Grimm!" Doorkeeper cried. "You've got a really good brain; you don't want to go messing around with it, goodness me, no! If there's one thing I've always missed, it's a first-class mind. If I had a brain like yours, I'd really want to take care of it. A daft old thing like me, I'd probably be no worse off for a little tinkering in the brain-box, but not you. Leave that head alone, I say!"

"You only had to say, 'I don't think that's a good idea,'" Grimm replied with a broad smile, holding his hands out in a placating manner; Doorkeeper's accustomed prattle had soothed his inner anxiety more than a little.

"Oh well, you know me, jabber, jabber, jabber!" Doorkeeper's smile was as broad as ever; somehow, the major-domo found a little comfort in his eccentricity, even if he tried to deny it. "But if you do get bothered by the big open spaces, just focus on the next tree or fence in front of you and see it as a wall. Then go onto the next one and look for the next marker.

"My brother, Ennis, used to do the same thing when he was running for long distances as a foot messenger for Earl Toomey. He'd say 'I won't give up running until I've reached that tree.' Then he'd focus on the tree after that and do the same again. So he didn't run fifteen miles in one go, but just lots of thirty-yard stretches. It works if you get bothered about how far away you're getting from what you know. Just remember each tree and then, when you're coming back, you'll get a real sense of getting closer by the minute. Before you know it, you'll be back home to a warm welcome."

"Thank you, Doorkeeper." Grimm felt as if his heart were almost bursting from gratitude and fellow-feeling. "I don't know what I'd do without you! That's good advice, and I'll follow it whenever things get too bad. If you'll excuse me, I'll see if I can find Magemaster Crohn."

Crohn, whose duties seemed endless, was checking the soap and towel allocations in the paying Student block when Grimm found him making check marks on a sheet of paper.

"Good morning, Questor Grimm," Crohn said, looking up from his

work. "May I help you?"

"Good morning, Magemaster Crohn. Mage Doorkeeper has asked me to accompany him on a journey outside the House. I know I am still, technically, your responsibility, and so I thought it only proper to seek your approval."

"You are no longer confined to the Scholasticate, and you do not, therefore, need such approval," the Senior Magemaster replied, his face blank. "I am sure I explained that to you."

"You did, Magemaster Crohn, but I thought it a prudent exercise, nonetheless, since my intention is to visit my grandparents. I have received but a single letter from them during my time here. I would guess that my grandfather Loras would come under the strictures concerning 'Association with persons inimical to the aims and precepts of the House.' That is rule of the House, not merely of the Scholasticate." Grimm's tone was cool and formal, but his troublesome, agoraphobic inner demon wished desperately that the Magemaster might refuse his request. At the same time, Grimm was berating himself for harbouring such a craven attitude. He did yearn to see his family; it was only the prospect of the journey that troubled him so.

Crohn pressed his forehead hard enough to show livid finger marks, outlined in red, when he removed his hand. He took a deep breath and said, "It is your family, Afelnor. Of course you must go, and with my blessing. That rule was not formulated with this particular circumstance in mind, and it is my privilege as Senior Magemaster to override such a rule. I therefore rescind the rule with regard to your grandparents. Go, and forget the House for a little while. I regret that, as a Questor who has not yet Quested, you will have to return to the House by nightfall. Lord Prelate Thorn would be displeased if you chose never to return, for you still owe a great debt to the House for your education here. Worry not; I will ensure that Lord Thorn knows of my decision."

Grimm gave a deep, fluent and courteous bow; Magemaster Faffel's lessons in Courtly Graces had not been a complete waste. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Senior Magemaster Crohn. I greatly appreciate your forbearance and your understanding."

Crohn nodded. "Now, if you would be so kind as to leave me to these tedious logistics? Between the two of us, this is not my favourite activity, for I have little talent for numbers."

Grimm almost started at the revelation that the formidable Magemaster had admitted to a weakness, but he managed to maintain a neutral expression, as Crohn returned to his check sheet.

"You did what, Crohn?" the Prelate exploded. "Loras Afelnor is a traitor to the Guild; you know that!"

"He is also Afelnor's grandfather, Lord Prelate," Crohn said, a hint of censure in his firm, unwavering voice. "Having dared to send the boy to this House for education, it seems improbable in the extreme that Loras would try to plant seditious thoughts in the new Questor's head. I have told Afelnor he must return here before nightfall. I trust that you realise it would be highly prejudicial to my authority, were you to rescind my permission. Under such circumstances, I would have little choice but to resign my post."

Crohn held Thorn's gaze, unblinking; he seemed unshakably sincere in his words. Thorn felt deep misgivings, but he knew it would not sit well with High Lodge were he to accept the resignation of his Senior Magemaster: the very man who had raised the House's first Mage Questor in a decade.

The Lord Dominie himself, the head of the entire Guild, had expressed a desire to send some of his new Students to Arnor House, with the specific hope that they might be tutored by such a man. Thorn remembered his mother's frequent admonishments that Loras knew nothing of the treachery that had been visited on him, but he knew also that Grimm was now a potent Questor: a mage who could exert powers beyond the realms of ordinary magic. Then again, if even Loras, a Questor of the Seventh Rank, had been unable to divine the truth, what chance did a callow youth have of doing so?

"Very well, Crohn," he said, nodding. "I accept your decision. Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention."

Crohn nodded, doubtless satisfied that his authority had prevailed. "By your leave, Lord Prelate?" he said. "There is much to do, if we are to be ready for the new intake of Students. The numbers this year are greater than we have seen for some time."

Thorn smiled. Crohn was correct; eight charity Students, each one a potential Questor, and thirty-five fat fees from doting parents seeking the best education for their darling, pampered progeny. Arnor House was becoming fashionable once more. Thorn thought of seeking the advice of his mother, Lizaveta, but he dismissed the idea. He was Prelate of Arnor House and a Seventh Level Questor, and he would make his own decisions.

"Thank you, Senior Magemaster Crohn," he said, glancing again at his encouraging account sheets. "Please return to your duties. A busy year lies ahead of you in the Scholasticate."

Doorkeeper reined in the horses. "Here we are: Lower Frunstock, Grimm. I will meet you at this crossroad in four hours. Enjoy yourself."

Grimm stepped from the cart on which he had been riding for three hours and stretched luxuriantly. Waving a friendly goodbye to Doorkeeper, he took stock of his surroundings. A single street led into the small village where he had been born, but a myriad of paths and lanes ran from it. The village green, where maypoles and swings were erected during the summer pageant; that much he remembered. Granfer's smithy is the third turning on the left... or is it the second turning on the right? he wondered.

With a firm step, Grimm selected the former option and began to take his bearings. The village was so much smaller than he had remembered it! He recognised the shop of Huret, the baker, no different than he recalled, with its ever-faded sign and dusty windows. He ran through distant, dim memories of playing hopscotch with other boys in the baker's flagstone yard in his carefree youth. Squeezing nascent tears into oblivion, he strode into the village.

He saw people busying themselves with their daily trades, most of them responding with respectful bows to the sight of a tall, cowed figure with a mage's distinctive, brass-shod staff.

Margen's Grocery now seemed to be a chandler's establishment, and the Black Boar Inn Grimm had known in his childhood had been renamed the Bold Archer; nonetheless, the village was much the same as Grimm had remembered it. He heard hammering, the crisp sound of steel on steel, and he stepped into a narrow alleyway.

The tears would not be stemmed; it took a mighty effort of will to regain a Questor's composure. 'Power and presence, power and presence!' he chided himself, brushing the moisture from his eyes.

The smithy was there; smoke pouring from the chimney, the old, tiled roof with the dip in the middle that he remembered. Chickens pecked and cackled in the yard. He was finally home.

What could he say? How should he introduce himself? These questions were made moot by the exhortations of a gruff voice that stirred his sleeping memories:

"Is that you, Joran? If you have neglected to bring that damned bar stock again, there will be trouble between us-oh, please accept my apologies, Lord Mage. We see so few of your kind here, these days." A broad-shouldered, grey-haired bear of a man stood, bowed, before Grimm Afelnor.

"Granfer Loras, it's me, Grimm! I'm home!" Grimm's voice was as

hoarse as it had been when it had broken.

The old man started upright, evidently stunned. "Grimm! It's you? By the Blessed Names, let me hold you!"

Grimm fought to regain his composure, but, at last, he surrendered to his emotions.

"Granfer, Granfer, it's so good to see you!" he cried, running to Loras. The burly smith was a good three inches shorter than his grandson, but he grasped Grimm in arms as strong as the iron stock he needed, and he lifted the Questor clean off the ground.

"It is you; it is!" Loras crowed. He looked around himself and, his tone conspiratorial, he whispered, "A Questor, then? So the blood ran true within you!"

He held Grimm at arms' length, almost as if suspecting that his grandson had absconded from the House. He seized Grimm's left hand to see the Guild ring, held it and kissed the ring. "That is my old ring, is it not, Grimm?" he breathed.

"It's yours, Granfer," Grimm confirmed. "Mine now. Don't worry; I'll see that no harm comes to it." His voice was husky and emotional.

With tears in his eyes, Loras turned his strong, Questor gaze on his grandson. "Have the Magemasters forsaken Mage Speech these days?" he chided. "Power and presence, boy, do you not know that?"

Loras seemed almost to be pleading, and Grimm realised that all his grandfather's hopes for the future were vested in him: the last of the line; the last bearer of his name.

"You are a Guild man, first and last, Grimm. Always remember that!" Loras was a Questor of the old school, fierce and proud, but the tremor in his voice could not be denied.

"I am a Guild man, Granfer," said the new Questor, his tone stern and sincere, "I will never forget that. I have sworn it.

"Come now, I don't want another Ordeal, least of all at your hands."

He matched Loras' Questor gaze with his own. "I only have four hours, and then I must go back to the House. Don't lecture me, please. I've been through an awful lot."

"My apologies, boy." Loras sighed, wiping a grimy hand over his sweating forehead. "I am babbling; I just feel so proud of you that part of me fears it is some fantasy. Come now, I must present you to your grandmother. She will be so pleased to see you."

Grimm had to duck as he passed into the smithy, which smelt warm, smoky and friendly.

"Loras? You haven't gone and let that Joran bilk you again, have you, you old fool?" came a cry from the kitchen. Drima rushed out with her hands on her hips. "If you've-" At the sight of Grimm, she stopped short. "Grimm? It is you! I didn't think they let you boys out.

They have let you out, haven't they?"

"Gramma." Grimm felt his emotions surge anew. "I'm a mage, a Mage Questor. I'm not a Student any more." Grimm held up his left hand, and Drima saw the ring. "I'm a Guild man now," he said, looking firmly at Loras, "but I will always be an Afelnor."

Over a hastily assembled lunch of bread, cheese and wild leeks, Grimm told his grandparents an edited version of his Ordeal. He reasoned that Loras would know the whole truth of the matter and that Drima did not need to know the depths of despair to which he had sunk during those dark days and months.

He told them of Madar and Argand, Kargan and Crohn, Dalquist and the Library. Loras in particular seemed to soak up every last item of news, and Drima looked at her husband with misty eyes. At a break in the conversation, she said in a soft voice, "It's your ring, isn't it, Loras?"

Loras purpled, blanched, worked his mouth, but all that came out was a strangled "What?"

"I know, my love," she said, her eyes brimming over. "I know. I never mentioned it during the years Grimm was away as a Student, but I must say it now. Loras, rejoice that there's finally another Afelnor to resurrect the name on the Guild rolls; I know you have a burning need to know that. Remember, Grimm, you promised me you would make the name of Afelnor a name of which the House can be proud."

"I know, Gramma," Grimm said, feeling more like a five-year-old child than a Guild Questor. "I've never forgotten it, and I never will. Granfer, I know the truth, and I want you to know I am proud to think that I am carrying on in your name. I will never do anything to make you or Lord Thorn ashamed of me, no matter what."

Grimm felt uncomfortable to see his powerful grandfather break down in hot tears. Loras' shoulders shook as Drima held him like a baby.

"It's all right, my love," she crooned, as if addressing a newborn baby. "I won't tell anybody else. Your secret's safe with us, isn't it, Grimm?"

Grimm nodded, incapable of speech, and he waited while Loras dried his eyes. On sudden impulse, he held out Redeemer to his grandfather, his eyes questioning. For a few heartbeats, Loras

hesitated, but then he stood and grasped the magical weapon.

For the first time in forty years, Loras Afelnor, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, held a Mage Staff in his hands, marvelling at the cool tingle of magic that the ensorcelled wood sent through his arm, accepting and welcoming it. He held the tableau for some time, and then handed the staff back.

"What is your staff's name?" he barked.

"Redeemer, Granfer," said Grimm, smiling. "I named it that for you; for all of us."

"It is a good name." Loras' voice was gruff but wistful. "Thank you, Grimm. Thank you, Redeemer. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. And thank you, my love, for putting up with the odd whims of an old fool."

"Let me look at you, my two Questors," said Drima, paying no heed to the tears running down her cheeks. "I'm proud of you both, and I always will be."

Grimm and Loras stood at the crossroads, waiting for Doorkeeper's return.

"I may not have much time to see you in the near future, Granfer," Grimm said. "Dalquist, Xylox and I are the only active House Questors at this time. I'm going to be needed."

"I understand, boy. I would have it no other way. Just see us and write when you can. I know only too well that the life of a Questor is uncertain at the best of times. All in all, I'm not sure whether I prefer the life of a blacksmith or not."

At that moment, the cart hove into view. Pulling up, Doorkeeper stared at Loras, his mouth open but unspeaking.

"Hello, Doorkeeper," Loras said. "It is good to see you again."

Still, the major-domo said nothing, his eyes wide. Grimm was put in mind of a small child who had been caught with his hand in a jar of honey.

"I understand if you cannot talk to me," the smith continued. "I imagine I am not too well thought of in Arnor."

"Questor Loras... I mean, Loras," Doorkeeper croaked, finding his voice at last. "You look well." Doorkeeper's tone was guarded and uncertain. "I... I shouldn't really be talking... that is..."

"It's all right, Lord Mage," Loras said. Doorkeeper blinked, and Grimm wondered if anyone had ever called him that before.

"Be so good as to take care of this Guild Questor, and take him back home." Loras' voice was thick, but steady. "Take care of yourself, too."

Grimm took his grandfather's hands in a firm grasp. "I'm going now, Granfer. I'm going back... home."

"Take care, Questor Grimm."

"And you, Questor Loras."

Grimm looked back at his grandfather until he was out of sight. Then he looked forward; forward to life as a Mage Questor, a true weapon of the Guild and redeemer of his family name. The sun glared, red and baleful on the horizon, marking the end of one day and the beginning of another.

As the wagon rolled back towards Arnor House, Grimm whispered, "I won't let you down, Granfer. The name of Afelnor will shine again; I swear it."